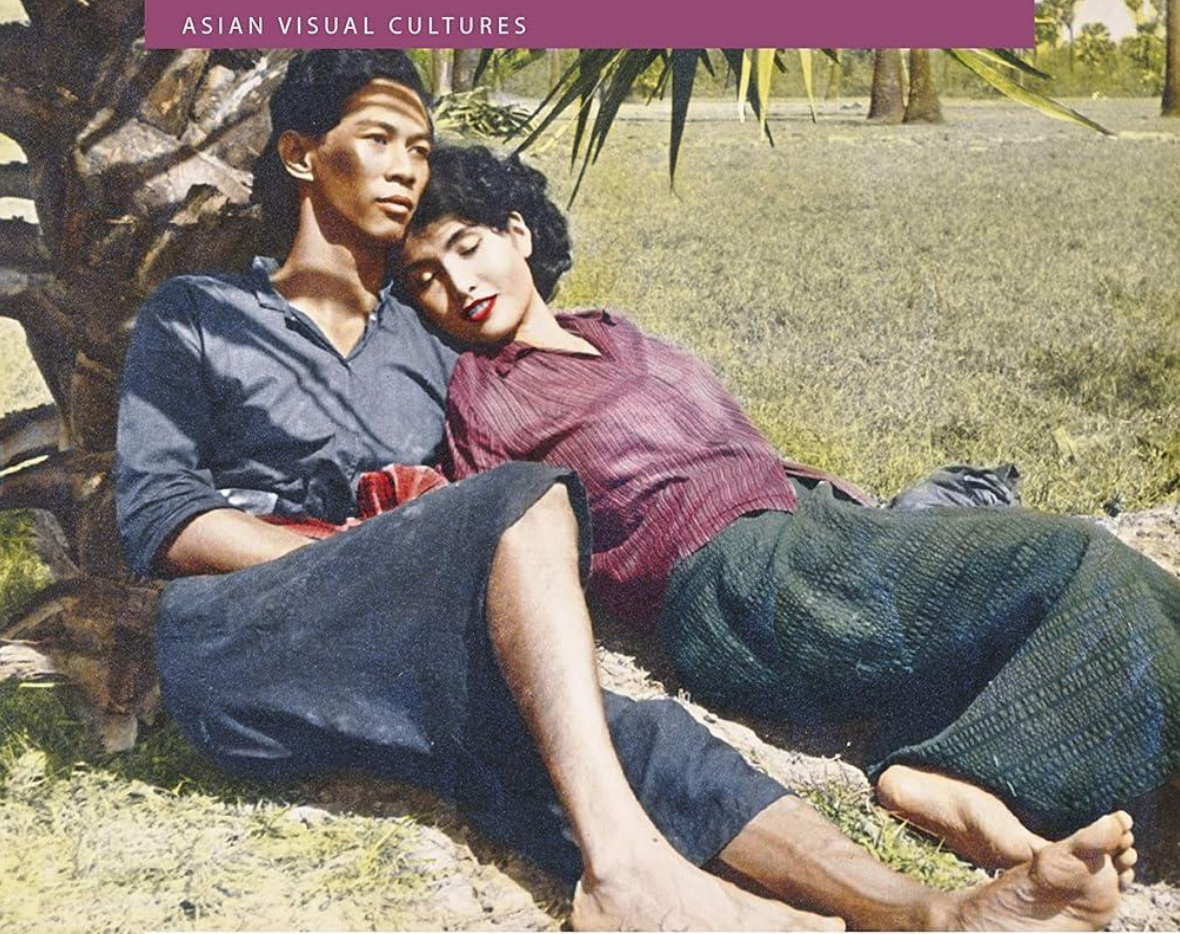
ASIAN VISUAL CULTURES



Edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie

Southeast Asia on Screen

From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)

Amsterdam University Press

The University of
Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

Southeast Asia on Screen

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Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. Asian Visual Cultures seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique. It welcomes scholarly monographs and edited volumes in English by both established and early-career researchers.

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Introduction

Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)

Gaik Cheng Khoo

Throughout the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in scholarly publications addressing Southeast Asian films and filmmaking (Ciecko 2006; Khoo 2007; Khoo and Harvey 2007; Lim and Yamamoto 2011; Ingawanij and McKay 2011; Baumgärtel 2012; Gimenez 2012; Chee and Lim 2015). Much of this is due to the phenomenal resurgence or revival of film production in the 1990s, beginning with art house films by Eric Khoo and Garin Nugroho, to be followed by younger filmmakers post-1998. The resurgence was the result of a combination of economic, sociopolitical and technological developments. First, the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 affected economies in the region, with Thailand and Indonesia being hit the hardest with the devaluation of their currencies. Recession affected the region in varying degrees. Short of advertising work, Thai directors of commercials such as Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Nonzee Nimitbutr turned their hand to making feature films, many after returning from studying filmmaking abroad, so sparking the beginning of New Thai Cinema. In Indonesia, the financial crisis triggered sociopolitical unrest leading to President Suharto stepping down after 32 years in power. The end of the New Order era saw the end of restrictions and controls including the dismantling of a film apprenticeship hierarchy that had previously made it difficult for anyone in their 20s to be a director. Similar calls for '*Reformasi*' and mass demonstrations not seen since the 1970s resounded in Malaysia in 1998 with the arrest and detention without trial of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The ending of authoritarianism in Indonesia and the radical spirit of reform infected young filmmakers in Malaysia and Indonesia who, with the added help of new technology (digital cameras), a 'do-it-yourself' sensibility and

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willing friends, began to make films cheaply and with fewer mental, infrastructural and bureaucratic restrictions.

The film revival coincided with developments in technology and the changing mediascapes (Khoo 2007; Lewis 2009; Hernandez 2012). Shooting on digital cameras and being able to edit on a laptop would herald the salvation of the moribund film industry in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and a decade and a half later, the nascent inklings of film production activities in Laos (e.g. Mattie Do's CHANTALAY, 2012), Myanmar and even Brunei, where two feature films have been produced and a film school, Mahakarya Institute of the Arts Asia, recently established (Brent 2019). At the same time, the digital revolution enabled the rise of independent filmmakers to make low-budget, art house, experimental and personal films. These are predominantly the films that attracted international art house attention and circulated at international film festivals.

The international success and prominence of contemporary Southeast Asian filmmakers and auteurs such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lav Diaz, Rithy Panh, Anthony Chen and Garin Nugroho, many of whom have won prestigious awards in film festivals in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, also spawned local and international interest, sparking scholarly curiosity. Filipino independent filmmaker Lav Diaz's films screened at top tier festivals while awards include the Golden Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2014 for FROM WHAT IS BEFORE, the Alfred Bauer Prize at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival in 2016 for A LULLABY TO THE SORROWFUL MYSTERY, and the Golden Lion at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival for THE WOMAN WHO LEFT in 2016. Thai art cinema auteur Apichatpong Weeresethakul and Singaporean filmmaker Anthony Chen have both won top prizes at the Cannes Film Festival. Apichatpong has taken home several awards over the years, beginning with the Prix Un Certain Regard that recognizes young talent and encourages innovative and daring works for BLISSFULLY YOURS (2002), then the Jury Prize for TROPICAL MALADY in 2004, before landing the prestigious Palme d'Or in 2010 for UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES. Anthony Chen received the Camera d'Or for his debut feature, ILO ILO (2013), likewise French Cambodian documentary filmmaker Rithy Panh was awarded the Prix Un Certain Regard for THE MISSING PICTURE in 2013. Popular among art cinema circles, the films of Apichatpong, Panh and Diaz have been the subject of retrospectives, academic theses and dissertations (Quandt 2009; Viernes 2012; Mai 2015).

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The State of the Discipline

The millennial revival of film industries in the region has therefore, unsurprisingly and rightly, generated much academic attention. However, until very recently, existing research addressing Southeast Asian cinema specifically was still sparse. Roy Armes's book *Third World Film Making and the West* (1987) is perhaps the earliest film book to touch on Southeast Asian cinema, though the relevant chapter lumps East with Southeast Asia, and only briefly covers Burma,[1] Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. John A. Lent's *The Asian Film Industry* (1990) includes a historical and contemporary account of national industries from Southeast Asia, namely the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Burma. A decade later, a slew of publications appeared: notably volumes edited by Jose Lacaba (2000) and David Hanan (2001) while the broader anthology on Asian cinema edited by Vasudev, Padgaonkar and Doraiswamy (2002) provided up-to-date coverage of Southeast Asian national cinemas. Such early publications circulating in English were often the effort of programmers, critics and archivists and were sponsored by regional cultural associations rather than universities and academics.

Similarly, most studies of cinema culture and filmmaking produced within Southeast Asia prior to the late 1990s were contained within the framework of national cinemas, as nation-building and modernity were and continue to be major themes. Even more are produced for domestic audiences in their own languages or, in the case of English publications in the Philippines, are poorly circulated outside of the country. This perhaps reflects the insular nature of these national film industries where, although films were occasionally sent to festivals abroad, producers largely focused upon domestic audiences (Rafael 1995, p. 119). Yet although these films generated discussions and writings among artists and film critics such as J.B. Kristanto (from the 1970s onwards) and Marselli Sumarno (1980s onwards) in the local press, little of this was ultimately translated into English (see Kristanto 2004). Memoirs by film insiders like writer-director turned Indonesian film archivist Misbach Yusa Biran (2008) and Singaporean-born Malay scriptwriter Hamzah Hussin (1997) and Malay director Jamil Sulong (1990), to cite a few, contributed much to fill in the gaps of film history of this period, but again have not travelled widely outside this context. However, there were a few Australian academic studies of serious films by 'idealistic' Indonesian filmmakers who immersed

1 As the government officially changed the country's international name to Myanmar in 1989, we will use 'Burma' prior to that year and 'Myanmar' after. The name use does not reflect a political stance.

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themselves not only in the film industry but also in journalism, poetry and theatre – such as Asrul Sani (Allen 2000), Usmar Ismail (Hanan 1992), Teguh Karya and Sjuman Djaya (Sen 1988). In Thailand, much of the hard work conserving and documenting Thai cinema history can be attributed to the diligence of the individual historians and cinephiles working at the Thai film archive, yet again only a small fraction of this information is available in the English language. Likewise in Myanmar, Myanmarese publications of its film history are inaccessible to the English-reading public.

Indeed, publications on cinema by local film academics (rather than film critics, archivists, programmers and journalists) were and still are rare in many Southeast Asian countries. This is because film studies as a discipline was often not offered as a degree programme and many regional governments did not display any interest in cultivating film culture. Governments such as Singapore only began to recognize film's merit as a viable cultural industry worth supporting in the late 1990s, and a full academic degree in film studies is relatively new and still uncommon.[2] Indeed, in the esteemed National University of Singapore, film studies is only available as a minor. In Thailand, film studies tended to be attached to area studies and was (and still is) part of Thai and Southeast Asian study programmes. The discipline is now embedded in digital and communication-orientated departments; however, a completely film-specific degree is still yet to be launched. As a result, academic scholarship on Southeast Asian cinema continues to be generated in diverse fields such as communications and media, anthropology, sociology, literature, history and even law.[3] Even in the Philippines, where a vibrant film culture thrived during the 1970s-1980s (despite or perhaps because of the repressive Marcos regime) and the University of the Philippines Film Institute in Diliman began offering a BA film programme as early as 1984, those who wrote about cinema still tended to be scholars from literary studies and Philippines studies as well as established creative writers.

Instead, it was local scholars studying film abroad which spurred academic writing on film (see Mohamad Hatta Azad Khan 1994; Boonyakul Dunagin 1993). To be sure, according to the former director of the University of the Philippines Film Institute, Rolando Tolentino,[4] it was only when faculty members returned from graduate studies in the United States in the 1990s

2 This excludes film production degrees. For example, the Institut Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Institute of the Arts, IKJ) was established in 1970 and the Department of Film and Television began the following year.

3 Specifically film censorship laws, see Saw (2013).

4 Email correspondence with Khoo, 15 November 2018.

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that a clear discipline in Philippine film studies eventually developed. This is less true for Indonesia, where film production degrees were offered by the Jakarta Arts Institute (est. 1970). But again, despite this active film industry, it took another fifteen years for Salim Said's 1976 dissertation conducted at the Sociology Department at the University of Indonesia – one of the few academic studies addressing Southeast Asian (specifically Indonesian) film – to be published in English by the Lontar Foundation, thanks to John McGlynn, a leading translator of Indonesian literature into English (Said 1991).

This situation is also compounded by the general tendency to homogenize the Asia region, and specifically to amalgamate Southeast Asia with other more dominant parts of Asia. In the contemporary context, the dominant focus on cinemas in East Asia and South Asia means that there are few collections focusing solely on Southeast Asian cinema and films (Braunlein and Lauser 2016; Magnan-Park, Marchetti and Tan 2018). Most of the time, articles on cinema in this region are corralled under 'East Asia' or become token representations of cinema in the region (Eleftheriotis and Needham 2006; Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009).

Putting aside geography and the size of economies, however, perhaps the sheer diversity of the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with their different colonial histories, traditions, ethnic groups, languages, regional powers and borders that have shifted many times throughout the last century, may also account for the difficulty of pulling together writings on cinema in an English (or French) language volume. The uneven and disrupted nature of cinema development and culture among the different nations which have undergone war and civil strife (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma/Myanmar) or the small population size (Brunei) have also meant that more academic research has been conducted on the cinema of certain countries than others. This much is reflected in our anthology where the call for papers drew mostly essays on Indonesia and the Philippines, with none from Brunei, Laos or Cambodia, countries where nascent independent filmmaking activities are only now appearing (Hamilton 2006; Starrs 2016; Norindr 2018).

For all these reasons, and aside from tomes focusing specifically on national cinemas (Ainslie and Ancuta 2018; Lim 2018; Campos 2016; Barker 2019 among the most recent), research addressing Southeast Asian cinema tends to focus upon the contemporary period and there is very little addressing the historical period before 1997-1998. Thus, this book aims to fill a major and timely gap in extant research through revisiting Southeast Asian cinema following the end of World War II, a significant period after which many of such nations gained national independence, and up until the Asian

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Financial Crisis of 1997-1998. A university course devoted to Southeast Asian cinema anywhere in the world would be considered a luxury at a time when arts programmes are shrinking and specialized film courses make way for broader ones like 'World Cinema' or 'Asian Cinema' in which the teaching of national cinemas from China, Japan, India and Korea would likely dominate. At the University of Nottingham, we are therefore very lucky to have been among the few academics and institutions to have been able to convene an undergraduate course on Southeast Asian cinema. It is through teaching this course that the idea for this volume first emerged, when specific trends, figures and themes became notable and parallel, eventually coalescing into a cultural narrative that reflects the complex history of this region.

That said, this anthology does not purport to be a textbook that provides distinct national film histories. There are already many existing works that cover more comprehensive national film histories and in much more depth (Ainslie and Ancuta 2018; Barker 2019; Campos 2016; David 1990; Deocampo 2003 and 2011; Deocampo and Yuson 1985; Hassan Muthalib 2013; Heider 1991; Khoo 2006; Lumbera 1997; Millet 2006; Ngo 2007; Sen 1994; Uhde and Uhde 2010; Van der Heide 2002). Instead, this volume aims to focus on specific periods, popular films and key figures that slice across post-World War II Southeast Asian national cinemas to ask how film industries re-generate against a backdrop of war, (post)colonialism and, ultimately, recovery. The chapters address counter-narratives told on screen and interrogate how 'the national popular' is both imagined and represented, highlighting obedient state-aligned depictions as well as subtle critical responses and the wider transnational trends impacting across the region (Barker and Imanjaya; Siddique). In some cases, films which capture the political socio-economic zeitgeist of the times act as cultural texts and ciphers for readers in understanding local anxieties (Siddique; Yngvesson and Alarilla), or the hopes and dreams that modernity or independence and revolution promised for the poor and for women (Khuankaew; Sebastiampillai; Nguyen). Bringing together scholars across the region addressing this subject, chapters explore the conditions that have given rise to today's burgeoning Southeast Asian cinemas as well as the gaps that manifest as temporal belatedness and historical disjunctures in the more established regional industries.

The Long History of Film in Southeast Asia

While an overview of Southeast Asian film history is a necessary part of introducing this volume, it is difficult to characterize an overall narrative

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associated with film in this region. The decades of boom and bust in each country do not tend to coincide: some film industries modernized much faster than others, while some were held back by war and poverty, or had governments that supported and/or restricted the film industry in various ways. It is certainly true, however, that the development of cinema, film production and cinema culture were all impacted by similar global technological developments as well as the military and ideological wars waged across the region. The impacts of changing demographics and global pop culture are also common themes, with the creation of the middle classes, youth culture and counterculture all manifesting at various times in various ways. For Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos, however, their millennial film renaissance is only now currently in its nascent stages, abetted by film festivals and filmmaking workshops and crowdfunding, all of which are producing new and exciting developments which promise to further the rich history of filmmaking in this region.

Going back to the early beginnings of cinema, Southeast Asia was never far behind the rest of the world technologically; as a region historically known for its strategic location on the monsoon trade route, film arrived relatively quickly after its invention. In 1897, less than two years after the Lumière brothers screened their short films to audiences in Paris, foreign travelling exhibitors brought film as an entertainment novelty and screenings were organized in cosmopolitan cities such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Bangkok and also throughout Java (Tofighian 2013, p. 13). While initially targeted at the elites and colonials, the medium was also popular with local audiences. At first, exhibitors screened silent, black-and-white European or American short films, newsreels and documentaries, but the desire to see images of one's own culture up on the silver screen spawned the first locally made silent film in 1919 (the Filipino Dalagang Bukid [Country Maiden], José Nepomuceno). This was followed by more in the 1920s, including the Burmese-made Myitta Ne Thuya (Love and Liquor, Ohn Maung, 1920), Nang Sao Suwan (Miss Suwanna of Siam, Henry MacRae, 1923) from Thailand, the French-made Kim Van Kieu (A.E. Famechon, 1924), Loetoeng Kasaroeng (L. Heuveldorp and G. Krugers, 1926) from the Dutch East Indies, and from Singapore Xin Ke (The New Immigrant, Guo Chaowen, 1927).

Early cinema history in the region was not so different from other parts of the world, with both local entrepreneurs, diasporic populations and foreigners setting up cinema halls and film production companies and studios by the 1930s in British Burma and Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Vietnam and Thailand, while the Filipino film industry thrived from its close colonial connections with America and Hollywood. Screenings not only occurred indoors within

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built theatres but were also included as outdoor entertainment in fair grounds, circuses, funerals and travelling shows, taking place alongside a range of other activities, such as musical or dance performances, shadow puppetry, boxing matches (in Thailand) and games in night fairs (Tofighian 2013; Ainslie 2017). Films toured the countryside, too, visiting rural towns, villages and rubber plantations where again they were screened outdoors (Teh 2019), sometimes accompanied by live dubbers, as was the case in Thailand (Ainslie 2017).

However, the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent Japanese Occupation halted many film activities in the region. Japanese film companies took over the exhibition halls that had begun to spring up, and screened Japanese films instead of the now established diet of imported Hollywood movies. Many existing local production companies were shut down and film equipment confiscated to make Japanese propaganda films. These mostly took the form of educational films and newsreels but one or two feature-length films were commissioned in collaboration with local directors: two in the Philippines, Dawn of Freedom (Abe Yutaka and Gerardo de León, 1944) and Tatlong Maria (Gerardo de León, 1944); and the films directed by Indonesian Rustam Sutan Palindih, Berdjoang (To Fight, 1943) and Di Desa (At the Village, 1944). The Thai Prime Minister, Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram (1938-1943 and 1948-1957) formed an alliance with Japan and produced nationalist films through the Thai Film Company, a studio bought by the Royal Thai Air Force in 1942 (Chaiworaporn 2002, p. 446). These propaganda films made under the aegis of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere were intended to awaken anti-colonial sentiments towards the European colonizers, sentiments that were expressed, when the war ended, through outright declarations of independence and the local production of nationalist films.

One by one nationalist leaders declared independence from their former colonizers: Vietnam and Indonesia in 1945, the Philippines in 1946, and Burma in 1948, though not without the French and Dutch putting up some resistance. Other Southeast Asian countries gained independence in the 1950s, the French giving up Cambodia in 1953 and then Laos in 1954. Only in Malaya and Singapore where British rule was considerably less oppressive compared to the more recent ruthless rule of the Japanese did independence eventuate in 1957 and much later for Brunei in 1984. Films that emerged from the Singapore studios notably did not generally challenge the British regime or display political consciousness, largely because they were owned by Chinese businessmen who did not want to jeopardize their position. At this time, the chairman of the Censorship Board was an Englishman and the British did not tolerate criticism of their policies, so it is no surprise that

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there were hardly any expressions of anti-colonial sentiment in Malay films during the 1950s (Hassan Muthalib 2013, p. 47).

That said, the film medium was recognized by political leaders in other parts of the region as an effective medium of communication for nationalist goals and was thus harnessed to that end. Indonesia's first nationalist film, Darah dan Doa (The Long March, Usmar Ismail, 1950), centred on the trials and tribulations of the captain of the Siliwangi division; Burma produced a black-and-white documentary, Our Union (Public Relations Film Service, 1948), and attempts were made to start a fully fledged industry with newly formed governments investing in film production, especially in socialist nations like Burma and Vietnam (see Ferguson, this volume, Chapter 3; Ngo 2002, p. 485). The Vietnam Revolutionary Government set up a Section of Cinema and Photography in the Ministry of Information and Propaganda soon after Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in September 1945. In 1953, Ho signed Decree No. 147/SL to establish the Vietnam Movie and Photography Enterprise and five film studios were established (four in the north and one in the south centred in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, respectively), mostly producing documentaries and revolutionary films concentrating on the war.

In countries where commercial filmmaking was already in existence prior to the war, like the Philippines, the studios quickly returned to business, churning out populist genres like melodramas, costume epics, fantasies and *komik* adaptations (see Arriola, this volume, Chapter 2). Immediate post-World War II films focused on the impact of the war and characters trying to rebuild their lives from among the ruins. Themes about war veterans shot in a neorealist style emerged, notable among them being Lamberto Avellana's classic Anak Dalita (The Ruins, 1956) and the Indonesian Lewat Djam Malam (After the Curfew, 1954), helmed by a freedom fighter, Usmar Ismail, and scripted by Asrul Sani, both pioneers of Indonesian cinema.

If there was anything positive to be gained from the Japanese Occupation from the perspective of cinema, it was the film training native Southeast Asians received as well as the impact of screenings of the Japanese masters such as Ozu, Kurosawa and Mizoguchi on fledgling local directors like P. Ramlee in Malaya and Singapore, who continued to watch their films after the war. Film critics have observed how Kurosawa's tracking shot in Rashomon (1951) is replicated in Semerah Padi (1956); how Ramlee paid homage to Sanshiro Sugata (1943) in Pendekar Bujang Lapok (The Three Bachelor Warriors, 1959) and Kanchan Tirana (1968); or placed the camera close to the floor (Ozu's tatami shot) for scenes necessitated culturally when characters are sitting on the floor (Bujang Lapok, Worn Out Bachelors,

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1957); and the '*mambang pulut*' (spirit of the sticky rice) scene in Nasib Do Re Mi (The Fate of Do Re Mi, 1966). In Thai film history, the influence of the Japanese *benshi* on live dubbing can be traced back to 1928 when it was adapted for silent films to compete with the coming of sound films. Silent films were accompanied by live dubbers (one male, one female) who, as in traditional forms of Thai theatre, narrated the film and often improvised dialogue for characters (Chaiworaporn 2002, p. 444). A uniquely Thai case, live dubbing was to continue in the post-war decades when the shortage of 35mm film stock forced filmmakers to shoot on surplus wartime 16mm black-and-white newsreel stock. Live dubbing, an art unto itself that made stars of dubbers, lasted into the 1970s so that a filmmaker like Ratana Pestonji who made strictly 35mm films in the 1950s-1960s stood out (see Ainslie, this volume, Chapter 8).

Without a doubt Cold War politics played a significant role over local film production and consumption through the ideological war for hearts and minds, and via the distribution of Hollywood films. In Thailand, despite the military coup that brought strongman Phibunsongkhram back to power in 1948 after being acquitted for war crimes and colluding with the Axis powers, Hollywood was happy to do business, setting up representative distribution offices in Bangkok (Sukwong 2013, p. 105). The United States Information Service (USIS), a development and aid agency established in Thailand, also had a film division arm that distributed newsreels and made anti-communist, pro-American propaganda films. The United States saw Thailand as a military ally after the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO, established in 1954 and based in Bangkok), formed to block further communist gains in the region, of which the Philippines was the only other Southeast Asian member. Both countries used their military and economic ties with the United States not only to stem the tide of communism in neighbouring countries but also domestically, blocking insurrection from the Hukbalahap in the Philippines and Thai farmers in the north. Film was a useful ideological tool in the fight against communism and Philippine national filmmaker Lamberto Avellana directed films produced by LVN that supported the government propaganda against the communists: Korea (1951), Kontrabando (Contraband, 1952), and some LVN-produced films that were jointly produced with USIS in 1953: Yaman ng Dukha (Wealth of the Poor), Not by Bread Alone, Maginoong Mamamayan (Noble/Honourable Citizen), Sa Hirap ng Ginhawa (In the Difficulty/Poverty of Prosperity), and Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay (Huk in the New Life/Livelihood) (Benitez 2010, p. 29 n. 28). One of the effects of Cold War politics in Indonesia was the reduction of local film production from 65 films

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in 1955 to a mere 14 in 1965, caused by high import taxes on film stock, an exorbitant 200 per cent increase – and the Sukarno government allowing each province to import films that strangled local filmmaking, the latter considered ideological vehicles for non-communist parties (Sumarno and Achnas 2002, p. 155). With the deterioration of the economy and rising inflation, few could afford to go to the cinemas let alone make films.

Over the span of half a century, film industries in Southeast Asia underwent booms and busts shaped by unique domestic conditions as well as global influences. The golden era of films mostly referred to the time when film industries were dominated by studios and produced both quantity and within that, some quality films: in the 1950s in Burma, Singapore – considered the heart of Malay films, Philippines (350 films a year), Thailand and to a more limited extent, Indonesia (averaging 37 films a year during the 1950s). The Philippines had four large studios that dominated the industry: LVN Pictures, Sampaguita Pictures, Premiere Productions and Lebran International, which produced socially relevant films as well as specialized in various types: action, rural comedies, musicals and super productions. The 1950s was also a time of great Filipino directors like Manuel Conde whose film Genghis Khan screened at Venice Film Festival in 1952 and was cited for technical achievement; and Gerardo de León (no relation to Mike de Leon) whose serious films from this era – Sisa (1951), Sanda Wong, Ifugao (both 1955), Pedro Penduko (1956), and the literary Noli Me Tangere (Touch Me Not, 1961) and El Filibusterismo (1962), the latter two adaptations from national hero José Rizal's anti-colonial novels, were later overshadowed in the West by the co-directed cheap cult horror movies he made with Eddie Romero for the American market: Terror Is a Man (1959), The Blood Drinkers aka Blood Is the Color of Night (1964), Curse of the Vampires aka Whisper to the Wind (1966), Brides of Blood (1968) and Mad Doctor of Blood Island (1969) (Holcomb 2005) (more in Barker and Imanjaya, this volume, Chapter 11). Compared to the 1950s, Francia was to characterize Philippine cinema of the 1960s as 'generally unremarkable' (2002, p. 348), driven mainly by commercialism in the form of imitation secret agent films (see Siddique, this volume, Chapter 12), Westerns, teenage jukebox musicals which propelled Nora Aunor to stardom (see Sebastiampillai, this volume, Chapter 10) and 'sex films' (*bomba* in the Philippines).

The 1960s was marked by major geopolitical changes: General Ne Win staged a coup in Burma in 1962; Malaysia was formed in 1963 and then split with Singapore two years later; the Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurred in 1964, triggering the Vietnam War; the 1965 coup in Indonesia disempowered the communist-friendly Sukarno and heralded the rise of strongman Suharto;

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and in the same year, pro-American politician Ferdinand Marcos became president of the Philippines. All these had implications on the film industries. For Burma, the Ne Win coup heralded an era of censorship that impeded the freedom of expression on screen due to control over film scripts. Likewise, economic instability, ideological agendas and inflation from the Sukarno period coupled with the 1965 abortive coup and the mass killings of communists (and those deemed communists) affected production, shrinking the annual output to between sixteen and seventeen films a year. The separation of Singapore and Malaysia in 1965 saw many actors moving to Kuala Lumpur and the loss of the Indonesian market due to the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation (1963-1966) (Hassan Muthalib 2013). Combined with labour-management conflicts, the coming of television, competition from higher quality imported films (not only from Hollywood but also from Hong Kong and India), the end of the Malay Golden Studio years was nigh as both of the main studios, the Shaw Brothers (Malay Film Productions, 1937-1967) and Cathay-Keris (1953-1973), closed.

If the 1960s spelled a period of nascent dictatorial regimes in the making, the 1970s saw the slow fruition of their policies and ambitions. Dictatorships were sometimes conducive to film production, if only to keep the masses sedated with harmless entertainment. In Indonesia, the authoritarian but economic stability of the New Order period saw two ensuing decades of a boom in the local film industry, averaging over 70 films a year from the 1970s to early 1990s (thanks to a stimulus package introduced in the late 1960s). This was accompanied by more systematic control over the film industry through censorship, regulation and political interference. The films mostly spanned commercial themes and genres – horror, drama, legendary folklore, mysticism, with sex triumphing at the box office and in quantity. Urban settings for romances and family dysfunction were common themes for this era of increasing migration to the city to find work in the industries and service sector, and what migration and induction into the workforce for women meant to families. This is also true of films from Thailand (as manifested in the BOONCHU series explored in Khuankaew, this volume, Chapter 13), Malaysia and the Philippines and reflected the governments' economic and social shifts from agriculture to industrialization (manufacturing, services) and with it, massive urbanization and development, though at varying states across the region and archipelago.

The cumulative effects of development (especially its uneven nature) under authoritarian and/or military regimes also led to social unrest and revolution in the 1970s in Thailand and the Philippines. Exposure to ideas about liberal democracy in school, concerns about Thailand's close relationship with

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the United States and its involvement in the Vietnam War coupled with the encroaching Westernization (youth counterculture) that came with socio-economic development all undermined notions of traditional Thai obeisance to monarchical and hierarchical order. Students, workers, farmers and some of the middle class took to the streets and ultimately forced the regime out in 1973, moving Thailand towards a moderate civilian government. The uprising 'shook the whole [film] industry. Afterwards it was as if an epidemic, not of disease but of freedom, had broken out,' explains Dome Sukwong, director of the Thai Film Archive (Chaiworaporn 1996). The period from 1973 to 1976 was one of experimental democracy in Thailand which abruptly ended when students protested the return of former Prime Minister Thanom (forced to flee in 1973) and when the military and right-wing forces stormed Thammasat University on 6 October 1976, shot unarmed students, lynched them and even burnt them alive for supposed treachery (Wyatt 2003, p. 292). Most notable from this period is the black-and-white 16mm docudrama made by the Isan Film Group, Tongpan (1976) that captured some of that experimentation with democracy that occurred as university students went to rural Thailand to meet farmers and to discuss the impact of a dam being built in a seminar. The film was banned from cinemas for its socialist message and was only released on VCD in 2006.

The tumultuous events of this period led to the emergence of political films even as liberalization also simultaneously saw the rise of sex and violence in local films. According to Chaiworaporn (1996), 'many socially aware movies' were conceived in these three short years but 'few saw the light of day' due to the crackdown in 1976 where 46 official deaths went uninvestigated (no one was ever charged). Notable was the emergence of a younger generation of filmmakers: among them Euthana Mukdasanit, a student activist who was one of the directors of Tongpan and who is best known for his acclaimed drama Phisuea Lae Dokmai (Butterfly and Flowers, 1985), set in the Muslim south of Thailand; and the more prolific Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, whose second film His Name Is Karn (Khao Chue Karn, 1973) about corruption in the civil service kicked off the issue-oriented films he made throughout the 1970s into the 1990s. However, with regards to technological changes, the 1970s in Thai film history also kicked off with two films whose commercial success (the musical Monrak Lukthung, Rangsee Tassanapayak, 1970) and critical acclaim (Tone, Piak Poster, 1970) signalled the end of 16mm dubbed films and the movement to (now financially viable) 35mm synchronized-sound filmmaking.

The social ferment of the 1970s was felt acutely in the Philippines when Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972. A younger generation of

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filmmakers who were university educated, more intellectually inclined and conscious about the role that film as art could play in Philippines society began the New Wave of filmmaking that stretched into the early 1990s. Led by film activist Lino Brocka, they offered films that were far removed from the escapist fare of the 1960s and 1970s, films that portrayed issues faced by the working class, life in the slums (Brocka's Insiang, 1976), the exploitation of workers, women, the naïve migrant from the provinces to the city (Brocka's Manila in the Claws of Light, 1976), drug addiction (Bernal's Manila by Night aka City after Dark, 1980), politicized or radicalized anti-Marcos characters (Marilou Diaz-Abaya's Moral, 1982; Brocka's Bayan Ko aka Bayan Ko: My Own Country, 1984; Mike de Leon's Sister Stella L., 1984) and the hypocrisy of the elites. Combining elements of melodrama that centred around the middle-class family, Brocka was able to draw parallels between the corrupt patriarch of the family to the morally corrupt authoritarian national father, Marcos, in films like You've Been Judged and Found Wanting (Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang, 1974). Other notable New Wave directors included Ishmael Bernal, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, and Mike de Leon (see Campos, this volume, Chapter 9). The issues faced by New Wave directors continued to pervade into the 1980s despite the ostensible lifting of martial law in 1981. This included censorship of films that were deemed subversive and that could undermine viewers' faith in the state rather than sex and violence. The Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP) charged that a host of sex films escaped the censors as if to divert the attention from the crisis facing the nation (Francia 2002, p. 352). Brocka, who made over 50 films, was successful in blurring the line between independent film and commercial films in his works at a time when sexploitation films were common.

In retrospect, while censorship is a perennial issue, only varying in degree over time and in the various nations, significant films of social and artistic merit have been made under conditions of martial law. In the Philippines, film became a pet project for Imelda Marcos, who created the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines and the Manila International Film Festival to showcase Philippine modernity to the world in the early 1980s (see Barker and Imanjaya, this volume, Chapter 11). This craving for global recognition on the part of developing nations allowed for certain films that were critical of their governments to appear at international film festivals and to even win prizes, though not without some interference from authorities: the title of Ishmael Bernal's Manila by Night was changed to City after Dark to avoid overtly naming the city that Bernal had portrayed so negatively. The film's ending was also altered before it was sent to the 1981 Berlin

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Film Festival. Some of Brocka's most critical films were smuggled out of the country to avoid censorship: Macho Dancer (1988), Orapronobis (Fight for Us, 1989) and Gumapang a Sa Lusak (Dirty Affair, 1990). The significance of Brocka and his contemporaries to Philippine film history and culture is apparent through the work of digital independent filmmakers in the post-2000s (such as Lav Diaz), who make historical films that pay homage to Brocka, political films and the Marcos period.

In Indonesia, meanwhile, by the 1980s the censorship laws under Suharto's New Order government were likewise increasingly restrictive, and scripts had to be approved before shooting. Nevertheless, censorship also encouraged directors to be more creative, evident in Nya Abbas Akup's film Matt Dower (1969), which functions as a political allegory of the struggle between Sukarno and Suharto in the interim years between the 1965 October coup and 1968, when Suharto assumed the presidency (Hanan 2009). Akup couched social and political satire under the guise of working-class comedies and the genre of the sex film in Inem Pelayan Sexy (Inem the Sexy Maid, 1976), which uncovers the systemic snobbery and sexism of the upper class towards the lower classes. According to film director and screen writer Imam Tantowi, filmmakers during this period had little means to express their creativity, so it was through exploitation films such as Jaka Sembung (The Warrior, Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981) and Golok Setan (Devil's Sword, Ratno Timoer, 1984) that they could quietly resist the repressive system (Imanjaya 2016). Villains in these films symbolized the New Order government and their defeat was roundly applauded by viewers.

If the 1980s were Indonesia's era of golden cinema, it was also partially due to the lack of competition from television. The state had a monopoly and there was only one station, TVRI 1, until 1989. Thereafter, the emergence and proliferation of private television stations, satellite and cable television in the 1990s spelled doom for film production, which went on a downward trend from 115 productions in 1989 to 25 in 1999. In Thailand, competition from television and VHS began a decade earlier, during the 1980s, as people stayed at home to watch rented videos and television instead of attending films in cinemas, which as a result of fewer audiences, began to close down. What sustained the film industry was the very lucrative (and often overlooked) development of an industry of teen-orientated productions which then quickly laid the foundation for a network of urban cinemas (cineplexes) beginning from 1996 that was to prove the eventual stepping stone towards the post-1990s internationally competent industry of today (Ainslie 2018).

Across Southeast Asia, a growing network of cineplexes then sprouted, targeting the consumer middle class by combining cinema viewing with

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shopping and eating out. This began first with the Ali Mall in the Philippines in 1976, then in Indonesia, with Cinema 21 in 1987 and during the 1990s more sprouted up across Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. With the proliferation of satellite and cable channels at this time, this was one way to draw audiences back to the big screen, though local films faced tough competition from imported products.

In the Philippines, meanwhile, the passing of film giants Lino Brocka in an accident in 1991 and Ishmael Bernal in 1996 created a void that could not really be filled by younger filmmakers in terms of defining a 'vision.' Other factors like formulaic filmmaking, the 30 per cent tax on gross revenues coupled by a 12 per cent value-added tax introduced in the 1990s (Dorsch 2018) eventually took a toll on the industry. Film production was down to between 30 and 50 films by the late 1990s. At this time, Regal Films produced *pito-pito* (seven-seven) films to supply to the cable channels: so cheap (7 million Philippine pesos, US$137,120 today) that it would supposedly take only seven days to shoot and another seven days for post-production (Tolentino 2014, p. 8). Such brutal conditions culminated in a major slump before the digital independents arose.

In contrast to the Philippines, Malaysia saw improvements to filmmaking quality at this time, with the emergence of a new generation of trained filmmakers. Cinema in the late 1960s and into the 1970s was dominated by Hong Kong and Indonesian films or those by the Malay studio veterans, which were famous for inane dialogue, weak plots and poor directing. Filmmaking attempts by independent Malay producers in the 1970s were short-lived as the films were of comparatively poorer quality compared to the Indonesian imports and thus lacked audiences, with many established production companies ultimately making only one film. Only Sabah Film Productions was savvy enough to attract local audiences with its comedies, Keluarga Si Comat (Comat's Family, Aziz Sattar, 1975) and the first of the Badol (Hussein Abu Hassan, 1978) series. By the early 1980s, local television had become a viable training ground for young filmmakers as made-for-TV dramas were then shot on 16mm (Hassan Muthalib 2013, p. 102). The film industry was also starting to see frustration expressed by a new generation of educated filmmakers and critics towards the continuing formulaic nature of films, including from Nasir Jani, Rahim Razali, Mansor Puteh (who made the first modernist Malaysian film, Seman, in 1986), Anuar Nor Arai and Othman Hafsham (who conceived the first multi-ethnic Malaysian film Mekanik, 1983). In the 1990s, another set of filmmakers emerged: Shuhaimi Baba, Aziz M. Osman, Adman Salleh, and the most international of them all, U-Wei Haji Saari, whose telemovie Kaki Bakar

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(The Arsonist, 1995) was screened under the Un Certain Regard category at Cannes. Similarly, Singaporean filmmaker Eric Khoo whose films Mee Pok Man (1995) and 12 Storeys (1997) would also set the international stage for younger Singaporean filmmakers (some of whose debut features he helped produce) to follow; and further down south, Indonesian Garin Nugroho, who also helped mentor an upcoming generation of digital independents in the post-millennium, stood out for his art cinema style and oblique storytelling.

If much has not been said about Vietnam, this is because its documentaries and fictional features travelled in a different festival circuit defined by Cold War ideology: to Eastern bloc festivals like Leipzig, Moscow and Karlovy Vary. However, the economic renovation (Đổi Mới) in 1986 – which meant reduction of state subsidies for local filmmaking – subsequently shifted focus from the ideological and formal properties of state-funded cinema towards commercial film production. As elsewhere in the region, film production also suffered due to competition from television and video: fewer than a dozen films a year were made as Vietnamese home viewers preferred to rent pirated American films (Mydans 1996). By the 1990s, cultural liberalization saw overseas Vietnamese, such as Tran Anh Hung (The Scent of Green Papaya, 1993) and Tony Bui, returning especially to the south to make films that opened up the way for more returning Vietnamese American filmmakers to work in the Vietnam industry in the post-2000s. This also sparked wider curiosity and international interest in local Vietnamese films and filmmaking, sometimes in veteran filmmakers such as Viet Linh (Tarr 2014). Nevertheless, the gap between serious art filmmakers and the more commercial tastes of its urban young viewers – manifested most clearly when Long-Legged Girls (Vu Ngoc Dang) beat the lavish Memories of Dien Bien Phu (Do Minh Tuan) at the box office in 2004 – would soon bring the issues of the Vietnamese film industry closer in line with the rest of the countries covered above (Duong 2012, p. 152).

Structure of the Volume

In an attempt to further interrogate this complex and diverse regional history, this collection picks up the threads of existing scholarship on cinema in Southeast Asia, addressing transnational film production, representations of gender, the pervasive effects of the Cold War, and serious engagement with modernity from a postcolonial and/or anti-colonial position. Such themes are split into three main sections, with each also roughly corresponding to a historical period. Section 1 begins by outlining the immediate context of

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nation-building in the post-war era of Southeast Asian independence, when the power of film as a national tool could be harnessed in the midst of the studio boom or the 'golden eras' of film. These films and film styles highlight hybrid forms and present sites of counter-discourse while also addressing issues of nationalism and military rule, in particular how an increasingly restrictive climate around the Cold War impacted upon filmmaking in the region and shaped cinematic content and ideological depictions. Section 2 explores the importance of key individuals within Southeast Asian film history, mostly filmmakers often lauded as auteurs and associated with more serious filmmaking but of whom there is surprisingly little written in English. Reclaiming such figures in the contemporary era is also a means to form a more artistic historical trajectory of filmmaking in the region and to recognize the legacies of these filmmakers, which live on in those they had trained or mentored, and in the intertextual referencing of their films. The final section moves into the 1970s and 1980s to focus on 'popular pleasures,' addressing the transnational genre of exploitation cinema and the mass production of films that have often been denigrated as 'trashy' yet are an important part, contributors argue, of laying the foundations for contemporary cinematic development in this region.

Many of the authors in this collection are scholars who themselves have produced or are in the midst of producing forthcoming work on the region's cinema (Ainslie and Ancuta 2018; Barker 2019; Ferguson on Burmese cinema; Siddique on Singapore). In particular, the collection importantly highlights a younger group of academics who are casting new light upon Southeast Asian filmmaking from the 1950s to 1980s, framing such productions via fresh theoretical approaches and finally giving early filmmakers the critical attention they deserve (see Campos; Hanan and Soehadi). As a whole, the collection seeks to tap into the current global interest on millennial digital cinema from the region and to suggest earlier points of entry into cinema that have so far been neglected by scholars. This retrospective analysis of older films contextualizes today's post-1997 industries, suggesting that particular themes, styles and developments have a long and prevalent historical precedent. It also suggests that archival research can yield fascinating new information about film personalities caught between politics, art and entertainment. Lastly, we humbly acknowledge the limitations of this book, with regard to the lack of representation of female filmmakers generally, and any essays on Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei. In the spirit of critical film enquiry, we welcome future Southeast Asian film collections to continue to excavate this rich past.

For some Malay, Indonesian, Burmese and Thai names, the cultural custom is to refer to first or given names, since the second name is either

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non-existent or not a surname but the father's name. Also, sometimes what seems like the first name is actually an honorific. The chapters will observe the appropriate cultural custom. Thus, the ordering of names in the bibliography will follow the name in the in-text citation.

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About the Author

Gaik Cheng Khoo is Associate Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. She initiated the first Association of Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference in 2004 and has authored and edited numerous books, book chapters and journal articles on cinema and filmmaking in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

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Section 1

Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-building, Modernity and Golden Eras

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Introduction: Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-building, Modernity and Golden Eras

Mary J. Ainslie

We begin this volume with five essays addressing the immediate post-World War II context of cinema in Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam and Burma. As a chronological starting point, this period represents a critical historical juncture in Southeast Asian history, marked by the formal end to European colonial rule and the beginning of significant US interest and presence in the region. Anti-communism became a central element of American policy and a renewed sense of nationalism informed independence movements and later governments.

Section 1 therefore outlines the immediate context of nation-building in the post-war era of Southeast Asian independence, characterized by a general upsurge in indigenous production across the region as well as the emergence of major key studios and filmic figures. Local regimes, rulers and governments recognized the significance of film as a source of propaganda and state interest in filmmaking correspondingly increased.

In our first chapter, Yngvesson and Alarilla take the immediate post-war context of 1950s Indonesian filmmaking, addressing both the nationalistic nature of such films as part of a postcolonial context while also highlighting the confluence of local cultural specificity within this filmmaking style. Addressing the Philippines in Chapter 2, Arriola then also highlights the development and growth of the major Philippine studios in this post-war era, a successful oligopoly which effectively streamlined production and solidified the key genres and themes that still characterize Philippine cinema today. Examining the ways in which filmmaking practices drew upon older media forms, specifically the medium of *komiks*, Arriola points to this highly successful and culturally specific practice as a means through which the big studios of post-war Philippine cinema were able to consolidate their market dominance. In Chapter 3, Ferguson then charts the development of Burmese filmmaking at this important juncture, including the growth in film production in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, demonstrating how the newly independent Burmese government and its military both reorganized

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the cinema industry and solidified particular thematic trends as a means to harness the power of this medium.

The section then moves further forward in history, exploring how an increasingly restrictive climate around the Cold War impacted upon filmmaking in the region and shaped cinematic content and depictions, specifically Vietnamese and Indonesian filmmaking during this increasingly militarized period. While cinema during the post-independence era in Southeast Asia is commonly marked by the cinematic depiction of struggles against the various colonial regimes, our chapters address such depictions in detail, highlighting both the relationship between film and the state while also analysing the thematic and stylistic implications of such influence.

Going beyond the post-war period and into the Cold War, Nguyen outlines in Chapter 4 how Vietnamese cinema produced during this period sought to mobilize citizens against US forces in Vietnam, becoming effective propaganda designed to remind citizens of their responsibilities towards the nation, before the later loosening of state control over cinema in the forthcoming decades of reform. Nguyen conducts a case study of Ngọc Quỳnh's 1967 film On Top of the Wave, on Top of the Wind with particular focus upon the depiction of women, highlighting how the connection between space and gender speaks of women's mobility in the nation space during a period of war. Chapter 5 then moves further forward in history to the 1970s and 1980s New Order in Indonesia. Irawanto assesses the development and portrayal of anti-colonial armed struggle in Indonesian cinema as cinematic spectacle, arguing that the increasingly nationalistic nature of such portrayals during the Suharto regime resulted in the side-lining of alternative forms of resistance, rendering important civilian forms of negotiation insignificant in favour of glorifying the military as propaganda for the authoritarian regime.

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1 A Nation Imagined Differently

The Critical Impulse of 1950s Indonesian Cinema

Dag Yngvesson and Adrian Alarilla

Abstract

Re-examining longstanding scholarly assumptions about how media has shaped collective images of nationhood in Southeast Asia, this chapter argues that early Indonesian directors like Usmar Ismail, Nya Abbas Akup, and Asrul Sani adapted the modern medium of cinema not only to envision, but to continually trouble the viability of the Jakarta-centered 'unity in diversity' called for by President Soekarno in the 1950s. Closely reading Ismail's Tamu Agung (Honoured Guest, 1955) and Akup's Tiga Buronan (Three Fugitives, 1957), we focus on two apparent paradoxes in what came to be known as Indonesia's classical national cinema: filmmakers' apprehensive view of nationalism; and their enthusiastic appropriation of local traditions and culturally-specific concepts – including ones considered 'backward' or provincial – despite the stated goal of modernizing national representation.

Keywords: Indonesian cinema, globalization, Soekarno era, nationalisms/imagined communities

Coming on the heels of World War II and five additional years of armed struggle for independence against the Dutch (1945-1949), the period from 1950 to the early 1960s in Indonesia was both a heady time of celebration and one of continued upheaval during the initial process of postcolonial nation-building. Across Indonesia's roughly 17,000 islands, enthusiasm for modernization and the forging of a singular, forward-looking national identity were complicated, and often challenged by deeply embedded local modes of thought and expression. Divergent ideas of the nation and of its past and future abounded, and in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, politicians and lawmakers had their work cut out for them; so too did self-identified

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nationalist filmmakers like Usmar Ismail, Asrul Sani and Nya Abbas Akup, many of whom had taken up arms in the fight to secure Indonesia's independence against the Dutch. Perhaps precisely due to the experience of violence, factionalism and moral confusion associated with those years, these artists, playwrights, essayists, doctors, lawyers and poets-turned-filmmakers subsequently rendered 'Indonesia' on screen in starkly realist strokes.

With strong links to cosmopolitan intellectual circles in West Sumatra, East Java, and elsewhere in the archipelago, Indonesia's emergent writer-directors adapted the modern medium of cinema not only to envision, but to continually trouble and question the viability of the Jakarta-centred 'unity in diversity' called for by President Soekarno. Reflecting the growing rifts in Indonesia's revolutionary self-image in films such as Lewat Djam Malam (After the Curfew, Usmar Ismail, 1954), Pagar Kawat Berduri (Barbed Wire Fence, Asrul Sani, 1961), Tiga Buronan (Three Fugitives, Nya Abbas Akup, 1957) and others, lenses were repeatedly trained on the darker aspects of the collective struggle for independence and its aftermath. The result, generally positioned as Indonesia's classical national cinema, is paradoxically distinguished by its consistently apprehensive view of nationalism and the nation. In the regional context of Southeast Asia, this reflects the commonality of what Roy Armes terms the 'striking [...] difficulties of establishing a national cinema' in the aftermath of traumatic periods of anti-colonial conflict and struggle (Armes 1987, p. 151).

Closely reading Ismail's Tamu Agung (Honoured Guest, 1955) and Akup's aforementioned Tiga Buronan, this chapter focuses on a further apparent paradox in the emergence of a modern, globally focused national imaginary on screen: the central function of certain local traditions and culturally specific concepts therein. While drawn from 'ancient' artistic sources such as shadow play (*wayang kulit*) or even from typically unrefined rural patterns of behaviour, we argue that Ismail's and Akup's adaptation of these elements as filmic techniques is crucial to the development of an Indonesian modernist aesthetic. Building on David Hanan's (2017) emphasis on the formal particularities of Indonesian cinema, we show how the resultant cinematic styles function not only as outward signs of cultural specificity, but as a dynamic ground on which the dizzying fluctuations of both domestic and transnational spheres might begin to be processed.

In our readings of the above films, these historically enduring elements are therefore deployed to encounter, appropriate and reinterpret emergent or broadly circulating ideas, techniques, genres and styles, positioning them within locally salient frameworks of aesthetic and political engagement, and thereby steering clear of the pitfalls of base imitation. In Ismail and

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Akup's works, the modern ideal of a transformed, rapidly developing society largely free of the burdens of history is especially targeted for deconstruction. As a tool of nation-building that envisions the future by constantly shuttling between present and past, cinema in Indonesia also presents an opportunity to re-examine Benedict Anderson's (2006) influential theory of Southeast Asian nations, where they are fancied as neat collectivities moving in synchronized, chronological lockstep towards a homogenous modernity. Particularly as life in Indonesia was increasingly filled with worrisome uncertainties in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the films of Ismail, Akup, Sani and others served as loud harbingers of the inherent paradoxes in any such ideally 'imagined community.'

Tamu Agung*:* Converging Perspectives and Times

In its early years in the Dutch East Indies, cinema was a foreign import largely in the hands of non-native producers. Yet film also became a medium through which the concept of an Indonesian nation could begin to be imagined and disseminated as early as the 1930s (Barker 2012, p. 24). When Japanese forces invaded in 1942, Dutch and Chinese filmmakers were disenfranchised and, for the first time, indigenous Indonesians were involved at various levels of the production process (Said 1991, p. 34), even as they were forced to produce only Japanese propaganda films under strict supervision. In sharp contrast with Dutch colonial policy, the Japanese also promoted the Indonesian language and traditional arts and encouraged the innovation of art into new forms (Rahman 2012, p. 56). Thus, even as pioneering filmmakers of Indonesian cinema experimented with modern filmmaking techniques from Japan, Hollywood and Europe, their imaginations were simultaneously filled with more familiar contexts and modes of expression, such as Javanese *ketoprak* theatre or *wayang kulit*, among others.

Because of the stark material and technological differences in old and new media at the time, the use of popular local performing arts as models for cinematic form did not generally involve direct or obvious references; for example, Indonesian films were not made to look like shadow play, although at times styles of staging, costumes, make-up and/or actors' performances did bear some resemblance to traditional theatre. Ismail's Tamu Agung is thus somewhat unique in this regard: an early scene depicting a rural district council meeting is populated with several elements clearly drawn from Javanese *ketoprak* theatre. As the various local officials argue fruitlessly

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back and forth, parodying a stereotypical contemporary parliamentary session where representatives of different parties bicker and nothing really gets done, a village headman in Javanese costume suddenly interrupts them, weighing in on the *tamu agung*, or exalted guest from Jakarta – a not-so-veiled reference to Soekarno – who is soon expected to arrive, and whose powerful favour is the subject of their disagreement.

'Is the *tamu agung* the king of Alengka?' he asks in a loud, staccato rhythm, comparing the anxiously awaited 'Soekarno' to Rahwana, the monstrous ruler of the fictional nation of Alengka in the *Ramayana*, local versions of which provide the narrative backdrop for many *wayang*-related performances, including *ketoprak*. The camera then quickly cuts to reveal a small *gamelan* ensemble, apparently unnoticed by the officials, which provides appropriate sonic accompaniment as the man stands and breaks into familiar, traditional dancing strides. Addressing the group in high Javanese (distinct from Indonesian, the national language), the man now speaks as the expected guest. 'Do not worry, I am a good and generous king who likes to give money to his subjects,' he assures his suddenly attentive colleagues, who break into laughter as if such claims on the part of the *tamu agung* would be patently absurd (*ketoprak* often uses humour to soften the impact of political critique). As the past is theatrically brought to bear on the cinematic present, the result is a layered and sharply humorous jab at Soekarno, whose brightly lit portrait hangs in the background, as if watching over the proceedings.

Appropriated by Ismail into the emergent discourse of modern Indonesian media is not only the visible presence of traditional arts, but one of the major structural-political tactics associated with various forms of *wayang*, and especially with *wayang kulit*, or Javanese shadow play. Similar to how Ismail jarringly breaks the sanctity of contemporary Indonesian politics (and the assumed modernity of the movie screen) by inserting formal and narrative elements associated with millennia-old Indic story cycles, one of the main modus operandi of *wayang* is to shatter the distinction between its 'timeless' primary narratives and the present moments in which they are performed. In the screen-based *wayang kulit*, this is especially the case during *gara-gara*, a rowdy musical interlude around the midpoint of a typical play that features the *punakawan*, or 'clown servant' characters, the most prominent Javanese additions to the Indian narratives. Their arrival interrupts the flow of diegetic time and sequence of story events, while deflating the historically 'exalted' status of the narrative by poking fun at its otherwise untouchable characters (mainly royalty and knights). The most important, eagerly awaited aspect of the clowns' entrance, however,

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is that they address the audience directly, allowing the *dalang*, or puppet master, to flex his improvisational skills, using the *punakawan* to create ironic or satirical comparisons between the 'ancient' events on screen and the present sociopolitical context surrounding the play.

Belying their humble appearance and manner, the attraction and power possessed by the clowns is drawn from their anachronistic ability to exist simultaneously in multiple temporal and epistemological universes, thereby weaving together disparate times, narratives and historical realities in a way that produces new or unexpected meanings for viewers. As René Lysloff writes, the convergence of multiple times and points of view in *gara-gara* produces a moment of mayhem and confusion that also 'dramatizes the critical period in the life of humans that is especially fraught with danger: the transition from one social state to another' (Lysloff 1993, p. 50). Not wholly unlike the time-stretching rebel figure Neo in The Matrix (Wachowski siblings, 1999), the *punakawan* are always 'neither here nor there [...] betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, [and] convention' (Turner 1969, p. 95, quoted in Lysloff 1993, p. 71). Their appearance extends the flow of time during moments of crisis, enabling themselves and often other characters or audience members to point out and critically analyse the stakes and stakeholders driving such a transition.

While there are no characters in Ismail's film that explicitly parallel the *punakawan*, their spirit and the spirit of *gara-gara* pervade the entire film, as comic characters question the unquestionable traditional past and the perceived modern future through the present crisis of nation-building. As David Hanan (2009, p. 15) suggests, Ismail and other like-minded filmmakers often give the sense of engaging in a longer tradition of public satire that transcends the emergence of the movie screen as such. With or without actual 'clown-servants' as conduits or deflective shields, then, Ismail exerts a *dalang*-like management of the film's narrative, time and political discourse. The open convergence of distinct forms of representation combined with the president's sudden figuration as an ancient, monstrous king hence begins to reveal the modern temporalities of both cinema and nation as beset with powerful *wayang*-esque convergences or 'wrinkles' (Lysloff 1993, p. 49). As a character comments just before the interruption above, 'once you have rubber time, you'll always have rubber time.' The entire film, in fact, can be seen as an extended effort to stop and explore the stakes of Indonesia's rapid transition to independent nationhood, focusing in particular on a key moment of truth with which the country was then faced: the first fully democratic parliamentary elections, which had been put off almost six years until 1955. As a result, 39 million enthusiastic Indonesians rushed to

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the polls, only to reveal an unprecedented level of political fragmentation, caused by the rise of what would later be known as the 'big four' parties: the nationalist party, Islamic reformists, traditionalist Muslims, and the Communist Party (PKI) (Reid 2015, p. 348). Loosely tying them together was the charismatic President Soekarno, who in his attempts to control the many emergent parties and interests, and thereby to expand his own authority, at times himself appeared to be stretched to the point of coming apart at the seams.

Eminently adrift in the sweeping, national-level changes surrounding it, Ismail's fictional village of Sukaslamet (the name, a conjunction of *suka selamat*, or 'playing it safe,' is a parody in itself) is shown to be in the throes of its own transition from one social state to another, as villagers' lives are increasingly disrupted by modernizing development projects, which seem as if directed by a distant, unseen national government. Underscoring this theme, in the opening song, the melodic, lilting notes of a *suling* (Javanese flute) are quickly interposed and transformed by the percussive cadences and brass accents of a European orchestra. A messenger wearing a Yogyakartan *blangkon* (or traditional headpiece) and riding a horse while singing like Roy Rogers, looks markedly out of place in the East Javanese landscape of Sukaslamet. His mission is to joyfully announce the coming of the *tamu agung*, but he is constantly interrupted by local residents complaining that the clean-up of the village they have been ordered to undertake in preparation for the visit is merely cosmetic and does not actually improve their lives. The paving of the road, for example, seems useless when there are no cars, and the clearing of the forest is downright dangerous because it draws snakes into the village.

Foreshadowing the entrance of dissonant temporalities and modes of representation in the meeting scene described above, the dissenting voices in the opening also critically evoke Soekarno's ideal of building Indonesia's postcolonial democracy around the indigenous concept of *mufakat*, a 'village-based form of consultation whereby agreement is reached [...] through a process of mutual discussion [...] and eventual consensus' (Hanan 2017, p. 31). While the possibility of real agreement appears distant, in this case at least, the voices, which are sung along with the music, are formally harmonized. As such they join the various instruments and divergent styles from which the song is composed, creating, if not consensus, then a particular kind of mixture of divergent elements. As Jan Mrázek argues, the musical accompaniment for *gara-gara* often employs a similar strategy: 'The "new," the "modern," the "international," the "standard,"' he writes, '"penetrate" into or are "married" to Javanese musical and music-like theatrical structure

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or composition, into Javanese "tuning"' (Mrázek 2005, p. 374). For all the fragmentation on open display in Ismail's case as well, then, there appears to be at least the sonic echoes of a call for unity, and the hope, however fraught, for a shared 'tuning' or basis of mixture and comparison. But this is only the beginning.

While the opening songs seemingly evoke the style of a fairly typical orchestral film score (as if assuring us that this is indeed a movie in the modern global sense), the idea of dissonance and of a particularly *Javanese* ground of representation and comparison is never far from the surface. Even before the last credit fades from the screen, the sounds of brass instruments are quickly and unceremoniously replaced with bronze: a Javanese gamelan, imbuing the following scene with its tenor of a *wayang* performance. The fact that Ismail has a character break into *ketoprak*, a type of theatre associated with the outsized influence of the central courts of Yogyakarta and Solo, further underscores the local politics of mixing and matching times, ideas and forms of representation. In this case, it aligns with the hegemony of certain artistic and political forms authorized by Jakarta – from whence the *tamu agung* will arrive – as both Javanese and nationally representative.

This, too, however, soon appears as something of a ruse that is set up mainly to be interrupted. Ismail, who was born in West Sumatra, deploys typically Javanese modes of expression not only to trouble the logic and time of modern nationhood, but to reveal a certain level of dissonance in the construction of Javaneseness itself – a concept deeply embedded in Indonesia's political unconscious. It is important, then, that the village of Sukaslamet is set in East Java, far from the courts of Yogyakarta and Solo and even farther from the central government in Jakarta. Wanting desperately to believe that they are somehow adequately represented in the distant purview of the central government, the townspeople pin their hopes on the rumoured visit of the *tamu agung*. But save for the portrait mentioned above, neither the president, nor even a Jakarta politician make an appearance. Instead, in a case of telling coincidence and mistaken identity, the desperate villagers assume that a travelling *tukang obat* (snake oil salesman) whose appearance and rhetorical style strongly resemble those of Soekarno is in fact the *tamu agung*. Hilarity ensues as the villagers greet the bungling charlatan with a lavish ceremony. Enjoying his newly inflated status, the medicine seller at first keeps his true identity a secret. In the end, however, he decides he wants nothing to do with the fraught task of leading the village (or by extension the country) towards progress and prosperity.

It is in the encounters between the villagers and the ersatz *tamu agung* that Ismail further underscores the dissonances in the key national concept

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of Java. The medicine seller is welcomed, therefore, with Reog Ponorogo, a spectacular ceremonial dance rooted in precolonial East Javanese courts. Wearing a Western three-piece suit, the *tukang obat*-cum-*tamu agung* contrasts with his surrounds in much the same way that a uniformed Soekarno would. Not quite out of place in the already fragmented, dissonant space of the film's diegetic village, he is nonetheless clearly uncomfortable facing wildly gyrating dancers in elaborate masks or mounted on hobby horses who go into a trance, taking on the attributes of tigers, peacocks and other animals. The political comedy of *ketoprak* certainly seems quite moderate in comparison – this time it is the living, and seemingly untamed, traditions of East Java that dominate the scene, showcasing the area's cultural autonomy. The sense of an intra-Javanese showdown between nation-state and locality increases as the music and editing pick up tempo, and the masked dancers directly confront the *tamu agung* in a series of shot-reverse-shots. The *tukang obat*, ostensibly representing the central government, appears both confused and terrified by the dance, even as it is performed as a sign of respect for him.

Finally, after eluding a district chief who barrages him with plans for a nearby tourist resort, the *tamu agung* dozes off by a lake, and Ismail loops the narrative back to an earlier theme. In his dream, the medicine seller is a sultan being served by his people, allegorizing Soekarno's increasingly apparent desires to reign like an unchallenged king over Indonesia, and presciently foreseeing Soekarno declaring himself 'president-for-life' under the period of Guided Democracy two years later. Replete with an elaborate, vaguely arabesque set, belly dancing choreography and maidservants in what looks to be a combination of Middle Eastern and Bollywood garb, the visual elements of the dream sequence appear more Indian than Western or Indonesian. Although the *tamu agung*'s domination over these elements implies the domination of the state over foreign influences, because this sequence is positioned as the fantasy of an imposter, it also suggests that this ideal is far from the reality of the situation. Instead, the *tamu agung* is revealed to be a feeble and ineffectual quack whose daydreams are unable to help those who imagine themselves his constituents.

Instead of the film itself simply being overcome by foreign influence, Ismail deftly combines and 'tunes' these elements as instruments that drive Tamu Agung's political critique, while at the same time imbuing his modern cinema with the considerable 'traditional' capabilities of *wayang* – placing the national present in critical conversation with the global and with the past. As in *gara-gara*, the seemingly discordant musical and visual styles engage the audience to think about the position and future of Indonesia, even

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as they are manipulated for comedic effect and mass appeal. Perhaps more important, by staging a symbolic conflict between the centre and periphery of Java, West Sumatran Ismail employs a typically Javanese approach in order to question, if not completely reject, the outsized role of 'Javanese tuning' as a basis for national unity.

The film ends with the *tamu agung* running away after being found out, followed by a further discussion wherein the villagers succeed in bringing matters to a harmonious conclusion, at least for the moment: they agree to support local leaders and not to let various party affiliations divide them. They thus also appear capable of solving their own problems without relying on either *tukang obat* or charismatic, but ultimately distant, national-level politicians. Whatever the legacies of the mixed-up, *gara-gara*-like conflicts that we have just seen, for the moment the *rakyat*-based power of *mufakat* appears to have restored order, at least at the village level.

Notwithstanding this apparent happy ending, the Indonesian censorship board reportedly considered banning the release of Tamu Agung due to the references to President Soekarno. The film was saved, however, by Soekarno himself, who reportedly found it funny and was even flattered that he had inspired such a clever tale. Other pro-Soekarno factions, however, were less charmed by Tamu Agung, and succeeded in blocking its release in certain areas (Hanan 2009, p. 22). With its earning potential thus reduced, and several other recent films also earning little or no profit, Ismail's Perfini found itself on the verge of bankruptcy. Desperately needing a hit, in his next film, Tiga Dara (The Three Sisters, 1956), Usmar reluctantly returned to the use of song-and-dance scenes, while deploying them in a less obviously satirical manner. Although Tiga Dara was a resounding hit that succeeded in temporarily saving Perfini from financial disaster, Ismail himself was despondent, feeling he had been forced to produce something that betrayed the artistic and intellectual ideals he had made it his life's work to inject into Indonesian cinema (Said 1991, p. 57). Despite Tiga Dara's ostensibly crass populism, however, a distinct, if more subdued *gara-gara*-like bricolage of mixed and matched elements – incongruent musical styles and erratic 'breaking into song,' among others – is deployed. Ismail, it seems, had not given up as easily as he let on.

Tiga Buronan: The Compulsion to Repeat

Late 1950s Indonesia would thus provide fertile ground for the continued realization of Ismail's dreams, even if he was forced at times to 'take a step

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back and compromise' (*Tempo* 1974, p. 45). Building on the lessons learned from past failures as well as the financial success of TIGA DARA, Ismail let a young mentee, Nya Abbas Akup, take the directorial reins. Akup (1932-1991), a native of Malang, East Java, was first hired as an assistant director in 1952. Following the success of his first feature, HEBOH (Sensational), at the box office in 1954, and further stints as unit manager and production coordinator on TAMU AGUNG and TIGA DARA, he was given the opportunity to write and direct DJUARA 1960 (1960 Champion, 1956) and TIGA BURONAN (Three Fugitives, 1957). Both films were profitable (*Tempo* 1974, p. 45), but it was with TIGA BURONAN, an acclaimed hit, that Akup truly demonstrated a knack for negotiating the prickly borders between a critical cinematic politics of 'Indonesian-ness' and success at the box office, in this case through a penchant for humour.

While generally less concerned with creating a sense of high art or intellectualism in his work, Akup clearly shared Ismail's taste for satire. TIGA BURONAN in many ways picked up where TAMU AGUNG left off, revealing a present state of affairs even more absurd – and more worrisome, if also potentially 'funnier' – than that of 1955: as the economy spiralled downward amidst increasing tension between the major political parties and their supporters, Soekarno, the revolutionary *Bung Besar* (Big Brother), had begun behaving in a decidedly less fraternal manner. In response to increasing fragmentation among parties and other vested interests, he progressively tightened his grip on power, briefly resorting to martial law while instituting his infamous Guided Democracy in 1957, effectively doing away with elections. TIGA BURONAN responds by taking Ismail's formal and thematic juxtapositions to an unprecedented level of farcicality, turning them into compulsive, violently stuttering scenes of repetition, translation and, at times, expulsion of formally or politically untoward elements encountered by characters or by the film itself.

Perhaps inspired by Ismail's troubled relations with musical numbers, these are among the first things slated for eviction from the diegetic world of TIGA BURONAN. About 24 minutes into the film, a group of farmers ensconced in a lush, sun-dimpled rice field suddenly breaks into song, gushing about the simple pleasures of rural life, where men and women work together to 'plant the rice and sing, with a smile on our faces as we wait, for the fields to turn green.' In an instant, the experience of 'typical' Indonesian villagers appears to be equated with that of various other exuberant champions of the global box office: the tapping shoes of Fred Astaire, spinning Kapoorian saris, or P. Ramlee's Malayan crooning – perhaps even the prancing tractor drivers of the Soviet steppes. For the moment, the implicit comparison

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mimes precisely the kind of formalized 'simultaneity' between centres, peripheries and other far flung locales that Anderson (2006, p. 145) argues to be the representational hallmark of emergent 'imagined communities' like Indonesia. Akup's imagination, however, soon begs to differ. Following this early generic foray, TIGA BURONAN's song-and-dance routines are apparently exhausted, and the scene is left to stand as a glaring anomaly. Instead of serving as a trigger for a pattern of repetition and variation – one that, as in Ismail's musical mixtures above, might itself imply a critical fragmentation – TIGA BURONAN's musical number is not even acknowledged with a formally similar nod later in the film.

This is not to say, however, that TIGA BURONAN is incoherent or completely eschews the use of recognizable patterns. From the beginning the film appears compelled, in fact, to stage a series of what are presented as 'involuntary' repetitions. The first occurs as the three fugitives of the film's title enter the putatively idyllic space of the village. Their leader, Mat Codet (Bing Slamet), has just escaped from prison, and as he makes his entrance with two henchmen, the lively scene is suddenly hushed as children are pulled inside by frightened parents. The vision of three sinister figures striding through the suddenly empty main street recalls the most typical generic signature of Westerns, where evildoers descend upon a deserted town, signalling an impending shootout. The scene evokes Hollywood, writes Hanan, 'just sufficiently for an audience to sense they are "seeing double," and that this may be Indonesia, but it is also reminiscent – through elements of its staging and framing – of American cinema' (2017, pp. 133-134). Importantly, in our reading, the doubling here is imbued with an additional, reflexive dimension: the presence of American cinema (and elsewhere Indian, Malayan, and Philippine cinemas – the main competitors for the mainly lower-class audiences targeted by Indonesian films at the time) is not only the source of a double-image for spectators – it is made to appear as if the characters themselves can sense the replication at work in the image. The ostensibly dramatic introduction of the three fugitives is thus laced with an additional layer of humour as their 'cowboy' entrance is treated as something practically inescapable, as if a scene in which villains wander onto a lonely street *cannot help* but evoke – and thus potentially be seen as imitating – the transnational steps of the Hollywood Western.[1]

1 Akira Kurosawa's 1961 Samurai film YOJIMBO would soon complicate this term, as it was the source for Sergio Leone's 1964 adaptation A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS, known as the first 'Spaghetti Western,' and itself the source of a famous, and much imitated villain-enters-village scene, which was copied almost shot for shot from Kurosawa's film.

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Mat Codet and his men hence register a glimmer of awareness that they are supposed to act a certain way in the movies, almost like an invisible force is compelling them to be stereotypical bad guys. As if responding to this force, they continually adjust their expressions to look properly ominous. Self-consciously, almost sheepishly, they project a prefabricated aggression, kicking, for example, at a bamboo basket that turns out to be empty, its near weightlessness demonstrated by its pitifully brief, awkward trajectory.

The dramatic struggle this begins to unfold is not simply between good and evil or order and disorder. Rather, and in stark contrast to the musical scene above, Tiga Buronan imagines its classic farming village as always already subject to a veritable storm of desires and compulsions, local and global politics, and visible and implied ills. Following the forays into cinematic globalization above, more discernibly localized impulses begin to assert their presence when Maman (Bambang Irawan), the male protagonist, enters the village soon after the fugitives' winkingly Western entrance. Returning after a ten-year absence, he strolls nostalgically through the wooded outskirts of the village, accompanied by a lilting, wandering melody rendered on traditional gamelan instruments in the soundtrack. Yet it is not only the calming, natural beauty of his surrounds that Maman seems to have been missing. Arriving home unannounced, he immediately sneaks up on his elderly aunt (Bu Rohani), purposely startling her, and causing her to blurt out a series of profane, nonsensical words ('dead dead dead!'). She, too, as if by magic or some invisible hand, is then compelled to act in an awkward, seemingly contrived manner, repeating everything Maman says to her, before finally coming to her senses a minute or so later. Here, however, the unseen source of compulsion is not Hollywood but *latah*, a highly localized behaviour pattern that psychiatrists refer to as a 'culture-bound syndrome'.[2] In medical and anthropological literature, *latah* is defined as a hyper-startle response where the person who is surprised will suddenly and involuntarily emit a string of curse words or imitate the speech or movements of the person who has surprised them. The condition

2 The psychiatric term 'culture-bound syndrome' refers to disorders that are thought only to occur in certain areas. In the case of *latah*, these areas are mainly Indonesia and Malaysia. While *latah* and a number of other culture-bound syndromes are categorized within a class of neuro-psychiatric illnesses loosely related to Tourette's syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder, cultural psychiatrist Ronald Simons (2001, p. 2) argues that 'in actuality [...] many are not syndromes at all. Instead, they are local ways of explaining any of a wide assortment of misfortunes.' For Akup, *latah* appears to function, among other things, as a metaphor for the operations of the film as a whole, in which the underlying, and generally unseen, problems faced by rural farming communities are made readable through their symptomatic effects.

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allegedly only occurs in Indonesia and Malaysia, where it is very common, particularly among elderly women, who are often 'teased' by purposely triggering the response, resulting in a potentially hilarious outburst.

While the scene, like instances of actual *latah*, will surely draw laughs from viewers, there appears to be more to its inclusion than the need for another comedic interlude. Akup juxtaposes and implicitly compares episodes of *latah* with scenes driven by a winking compulsion to mimic or appropriate cinematically (such as the villains' entrance above). Apposite to this, the term *latah* is often applied metaphorically, and has even been used to characterize the strong impulse among directors and producers (and possibly other artists) to copy the tropes of financially successful films. As *Tempo* put it in a 1974 article about the box office triumph – and expected imitations – of Akup's then-newly released Koboi Cengeng (Cry-baby Cowboy, 1974),[3] 'like it or not, the habit of taking the easy way out in the production of films is still viable in Indonesia. So is the tendency towards *latah*' (1974, p. 48). The reference to a 'culture-bound' concept on the part of *Tempo*'s staff writers Salim Said and Goenawan Muhammad points to their perception of a problematic condition with which geopolitically, economically, and thus also cinematically marginalized nations such as Indonesia may be especially beset. In this case, however, because of the highly localized nature of *latah* itself, the term carries a sense of self-deprecation that is reflexively marked as not only 'Third World' or 'Global South,' but typically Indonesian or Malaysian. The use of the term thus also contains a paradoxical kernel of pride, even something akin to nationalism, as if to say: 'For complex reasons, we're often forced to imitate, but we do it like *this*.'

Similarly, in Tiga Buronan, Akup's inclusion of *latah* – immediately after presenting a Western genre-driven, cinematic case of compulsion to repeat – slyly acknowledges the political economic reality of global and local repetition, while implying that to engage in stylistic appropriation is not necessarily an act of simple imitation, but is often driven by the equally powerful impulses of reading and translation.[4] Akup's modus of reading,

3 Koboi Cengeng is almost entirely premised on a knowing appropriation of the tropes of Westerns, simultaneously localizing them to comedic effect. Hanan argues that between Tiga Buronan and Koboi Cengeng, Akup may in fact have innovated a subgenre of Indonesian cinema, that of 'the spoof of the cowboy film' (2017, pp. 135-136). Koboi Cengeng in particular sparked a few other comedic takes on the Western in the years that followed.

4 In line with this idea, James Siegel's (1986) analysis of *latah* in Surakarta, Central Java, includes a second, related condition in which he sees a more complex, if still compelled, engagement with a startling or suddenly imposed stimulus: a 'structure of statement and response was thus established' instead of mere 'repetition [...] without the pretense of reply' (p. 124). In Hildred

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translating and combining diverse local and foreign elements, while reflecting on the fact that he is doing so in a particular way, is precisely what the *Tempo* critics lauded in his later films in the 1970s (they also mentioned TIGA BURONAN as the film with which Akup had come into his own as a writer-director). Their sharper criticism was thus reserved for other filmmakers who might also be afflicted with cinematic *latah*, but would potentially allow it to devolve into base imitation, cultivating more direct engagements with globalized images and tropes. Such films, the *Tempo* critics argued, generally rely on cheap physical comedy or slapstick in which jokes are 'closed,' whereas Akup's practice of leaving them 'unfinished' functions to open a 'space for the play of viewers' imaginations' in which 'particular knowledge and experience' are required to fully appreciate the juxtaposition of images and sounds on-screen (1974, pp. 46-47).

TIGA BURONAN's *latah* scene, while potentially generating a sense of absurd, random humour for international audiences unfamiliar with the condition, similarly demands a locally experienced eye to understand what is actually going on. Akup works to complicate the rural, 'backward' associations broadly attached to *latah* in Indonesia, while taking care not to lose sight of these powerful sentiments. It is precisely these deceptively sheltered, traditionalist tendencies that form the core of Akup's wildly acquisitive cinematic imagination, and of the complexly localized-yet-eminently-transnational perspective he and other nationalist filmmakers of the time were driven to establish. Unlike musical numbers, then, *latah* – broadly conceived – is instituted as a consistent theme throughout TIGA BURONAN. After being introduced by Maman and his aunt, the compulsion to imitate, or to trigger imitation/repetition in others, spreads contagiously among other characters, particularly the villains. Bouts of compulsion and repetition in characters' behaviour parallel the formal stutters and replications of the film itself, as it frequently stalls or stops to include some seemingly unrelated element, even as the narrative inches towards the promise of eventual conclusion. As the film proceeds, the tenor of its repetitions becomes increasingly politicized.

On the other side of the river that divides the village, the contemporary historical context of party and ideological fragmentation comes to the fore as the villain Mat Codet has a tense encounter with Pak Haji (Udjang), a man whose completion of the Hajj (thus the moniker 'Haji'), or pilgrimage

Geertz's reading, even regular *latah* contains a politicized element of potential resistance: the 'compulsive obedience of commands,' she argues, are 'at base unconscious parodies of the social relationship between inferior and superior' (1968, p. 99).

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to Mecca, ostensibly confers the status of a moral pillar and teacher of Islam in the context of the village. As a repository for religious values, however, Pak Haji has also seemingly managed to amass large quantities of money and land during both colonialism and the recent struggle to overthrow it. Precisely for this reason, it seems, his house is the first stop on Mat Codet's itinerary of conquest and appropriation. Their conflict, centred on resources and power, breeds further compulsive behaviour on both sides. The content of the compulsions in turn begins to suggest the complex interconnectedness of the rural/local with the national and the global at the level of political discourse.

One night Pak Haji finds his bedroom ransacked and is accosted by Bodin (Tukidjo), the third fugitive, who is looking for a further 1000 rupiah (at the time quite a sum) to add to the 4000 Mat Codet has already succeeded in extorting from Pak Haji. Because he is robbing Pak Haji in the service of Codet's power grab (Codet is using violence and intimidation to assume the position of head of the village government), it falls upon Bodin to lend an air of justice and legitimacy to his pilfering. As if grasping for sufficiently erudite words, he blurts out: '*Borjuis, kapitalis, imperialis … iblis!*' ('Bourgeois, capitalist, imperialist … devil!'). Clearly, these then-'viral' terms associated with the spread of leftist thought and the growing influence of the US-Soviet Cold War had also infected the discourse of local political contests.

More specifically, the inclusion of the terms can be seen as pointing to the increasing influence of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which since the 1955 elections had been pushing hard to address the uneven distribution of wealth, and particularly of land, following Indonesia's transition to an independent republic.[5] Akup's dialog thus channels the then-escalating conflict – of which the drive for land redistribution was a key trigger – between the rapidly expanding PKI and wealthy Muslim landowners in Java and elsewhere. The goal, however, does not appear to be simply pointing out the local influence of the Cold War, or even associating the PKI and their plans for land reform with banditry. Instead, as in many of the borrowed transnational filmic elements above, the words emerge as compulsions and are played for sardonic humour.

As imagined by Akup, the terms' increasing circulation in rural areas of Indonesia post-1955 triggers a process of imitation that is in fact closer to a compulsive act of de/familiarization and resignification. While instinctively

5 Codet's expression of interest in acquiring Pak Haji's rice fields in an earlier scene explicitly engages with this issue, while adding satirical depth to the mock-idyllic song and dance in the rice field described above.

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appropriating and deploying the terms to legitimize his boss's power grab, bandit Bodin also positions them in a local linguistic idiom in which their value is partly reset by the seemingly banal coincidence of rhyme: his final addition of 'devil,' while potentially appropriate to the transnational political discourse of various leftist groups, here results from the fact that the Indonesian iterations of the first three words, 'bourgeois,' 'capitalist,' and 'imperialist,' all 'iss' endings (i.e. *borjuis*, *kapitalis*, *imperialis*), rhyme with the word for devil, *iblis*. After another searching pause, *iblis* is thus placed by Bodin in sequence with the other three terms, as if spontaneously drawing (and hence localizing) the idea of an imperialist Satan from the coincidence of Indonesian phonetics, the Cold War and the holier-than-thou figure of Pak Haji standing before him.[6]

The terms' transnationally derived authority, lobbed with increasing rigidity and vitriol across the rising political divides with which Indonesia was then beset, is thus humorously deflated. So, too, is the status of the local left, and of those like Pak Haji, who are often labelled right wing. The net outcome of Bodin's bumbling grasp at the words' legitimizing power, and of their resulting application to a feudal Muslim landowner, is further defamiliarization from their established, Soviet/Western/global senses. Like the transnationally infused musical scene above, these well-travelled expressions have achieved a certain local currency. Yet Akup's satirical appropriation suggests that people use such terms not only because they convey powerful 'foreign' values, but because, as a result of their relative unfamiliarity, they also offer a potentially radical symbolic flexibility in their local application. Emerging, as if from the ether of transnational exchange, the implication of a discourse, genre or artistic trope is thus implied by Akup to be established through a process of repetition – often involuntary on both ends – that inevitably leads to translation and the re/establishment of value (or in fact rejection) according to local frameworks of understanding and exchange.

Instead of taking a hard position in support of the contemporary left or right, Akup's satire invokes the global in order to stage a critique of

6 Akup's use of *imperialis/iblis* is even more prescient in the context of the PKI's now-infamous concept of *tujuh setan desa* (the seven village devils). The latter was based on socio-economic studies conducted by party cadres in numerous Javanese villages in relation to ongoing efforts at land reform in the early 1960s. The term was popularized in the writings and public addresses of party chairman Aidit in 1964. *Iblis* and *setan* have essentially the same meaning in Indonesian, and Akup's application of *iblis* in 1957 unwittingly predicted two prominent figures later included in the PKI's list of rural *setan*s: 'evil landlords' (*tuan tanah jahat*) and 'village bandits' (*bandit desa*) (Triyana 2015).

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contemporary local politics writ large: not unlike Ismail's TAMU AGUNG, TIGA BURONAN seems intent on demonstrating the lack of singularly good motivations on any side of Indonesia's increasingly compromised '*mufakat*.' Pak Haji is thus painted mainly as a stingy coward, while Mat Codet and his gang, despite being the 'bad guys,' and whether or not they are dyed-in-wool leftists, are also clearly shown to be Muslims, which generally carries a positive connotation (the 'Mat' which adorns Codet's name is a local foreshortening of Muhammad). Codet's gang has access to weapons because, like most other men capable of doing so, they fought in the war for independence against the Dutch. Hence, they are both fugitives under the post-war national power structure, and revolutionary heroes who struggled to establish this state of affairs, even as they use continued violence to contest and amend its skewed distribution of wealth and power.[7] It is in this eminently muddy political context that Bodin compulsively attempts to sell Codet's mission by peppering it with leftist jargon.

Drawing on West Javanese *lenong* theatre as a locally familiar approach to drama (Hanan 2017, p. 130), Akup's stormy, at times chaotic way of combining far-flung elements in local idioms or 'tunings' evokes yet modifies the Javanese technique of *gara-gara* much like Ismail's TAMU AGUNG. In TIGA BURONAN, the narrative and philosophical trope of *gara-gara* is even more clearly deterritorialized, as it is merged with a style of performance – *lenong* – associated with a purportedly 'backward' ethno-linguistic group, the Betawi. Unlike the neat, nationally sanctioned image of 'Java' (whatever the more complex reality), Betawi is a relatively new categorization understood to be a conglomeration of a number of different groups, including Chinese Indonesians, who migrated to what is now Jakarta in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite its association with the capital, then, *lenong* is a far cry from authorized ideals of national identity. Even as key features of the film's music and dramatic approach reflect the specific mixtures

7 The figure of the confused, maladjusted or criminalized *pedjuang* (former freedom fighters) is a consistent theme that runs through the films of the 1950s and early 1960s, including Djadoeg Djajakusuma's EMBUN (Dew, 1951), Ismail's LEWAT DJAM MALAM (AFTER THE CURFEW, 1954), PEDJUANG (Freedom Fighter, 1960), ANAK-ANAK REVOLUSI (Children of the Revolution, 1964) and Asrul Sani's PAGAR KAWAT BERDURI (Barbed Wire Fence, 1962) – Sani also wrote the script for LEWAT DJAM MALAM. In actuality, many former freedom fighters who were not accepted into the national military (or who refused to become professional soldiers) became hired muscle for organized crime, corrupt businesses or covert state operations. Generally known as *preman*, these gangsters are still common throughout Indonesia; the ongoing impunity of several such *preman* in Medan, Sumatra, despite having admitted to murdering suspected communists in the mid-1960s, was the subject of the recent documentary ACT OF KILLING (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012).

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of elements on which Jakartanese Betawi traditions were constructed, however, the film as a platform for the marriage of the particular and the putatively universal (a union shown to often end in divorce) is also powerfully compelled to adopt a different kind of 'tuning': that of Indonesian, the national language, which, save for a telltale '*Gua*' ('I') or two thrown in by Bing Slamet as Mat Codet, notably replaces the Betawi-dialect patter which would otherwise inflect a performance of *lenong*. One of the results of Akup's approach is therefore a rearticulated and continually shifting imagination of Indonesia in its formative years, of a nation unifying and moving forward precisely on the strength of some of its most putatively traditional or even 'backward' elements.

Conclusion

Via Akup and Ismail (and many others), Javanese and other local modes of representation are taken up, critically reformulated and fitted for new technologies of communication, and then transposed onto the contemporary 'imagined community' that Benedict Anderson (2006) famously identified as the media-saturated soul of the modern nation. As in the past, the function of such local modes is to contribute to a complex and flexible framework of representation that receives and processes the circulation of local and global events and ideas (including the idea of the nation itself), while 'tuning' them to the shifting frequencies of Indonesian experience. If this is a key function of 'national' cinema, Tiga Buronan and Tamu Agung, like Ismail's Lewat Djam Malam, Asrul Sani's Pagar Kawat Berduri, Djadoeg Djajakusuma's Embun (Dew, 1951) and many other films of the time, present an opportunity to re-examine some of the longstanding scholarly assumptions about the ways in which media has shaped collective images of nationhood in Southeast Asia. Both films are clearly and frequently compelled to stop and think – often to the point of obsession in the case of Tiga Buronan – about the 'strange' idea of the nation as a singular and thoroughly modern entity. As such they can hardly be said to be in lockstep with the obsessively forward-looking, linear march of 'homogeneous empty time' that Anderson sees as the basis of such imagined communities and their ability to synchronize and unite diverse populations (2006, p. 26).

Especially in Akup's hands, the theoretical compulsion to imagine the nation as a hyper-rationalized ideal is subjected to the same stuttering, uneven, or suddenly arresting patterns with which Tiga Buronan and its politics of translation are constantly beset. The process of nation-building is

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thereby re-imagined as a typically fraught and paradoxical affair, indeed not unlike the swirling, geopolitical storms that are the signature of *gara-gara*. In popular films that are also self-consciously national, then, the sanctity of the nation is continually in question, and Indonesia's historical progression is conceived and expressed as always already shot through with bits and pieces of just about everything in the world, including the continuation of ostensibly unmodern local impulses and traditions. The movement through time of nation, city or village – closely related but not interchangeable entities – is thus characterized not as an inevitable, progressive march towards the 'remarkable planetary spread [...] of profoundly standardized conceptions of politics' (2002, p. 29) as Anderson sees it, but by frequent moments of stillness and long, backward glances and forays into the events, memories and narrative tropes of the past.

If a Western theoretical analogue is needed, these moments might be compared to the 'messianic cessation[s] of happening' that Walter Benjamin (1968, p. 263) saw as volatile, yet generative sites where emergent ideas, terms and techniques can be assembled, assessed and processed with and through the past. For Benjamin, 'homogeneous empty time' is never the sole basis of development or historical change. The present moment, he wrote, is always already 'shot through with chips of Messianic time' (1968, p. 263). Anderson, too, saw parallels between Benjamin's thought and modern Southeast Asian experience. But while his analysis relies heavily on Benjamin's conception of history, Anderson splits it apart, relegating the messianic to the 'mediaeval' past (2006, p. 24), far outside of the sphere of modern thought. Anderson thus envisions an increasingly homogeneous, and in his view Westernized, global future. As our analysis demonstrates, however, in Indonesia, where Anderson's revisionist formulations were most famously applied, the imaginations of early national cineastes hew far closer to the dynamic historical time envisioned by Benjamin.

Tiga Buronan's final images are particularly apt in this regard. At one level, the film's jumpy narrative is finally brought to a happy closing: after a brief battle with soldiers, Mat Codet is captured, and most of his men are killed. A further show of closure and ostensible capitulation to audience desires is made as Maman, the protagonist, proposes to Pak Haji's beautiful daughter (Chitra Dewi), thus securing his own access to the old devil's plentiful rice fields. Yet what is most striking about the final shots of the village, now looking as if frozen for posterity into a picture of '*rust en orde*' (peace and order) as the recently departed Dutch put it, is that the images are literally riddled with the presence of new authoritarian outsiders: numerous, machine gun-toting soldiers from

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the national army. Without them, the images strongly imply, the village would simply return to its more 'natural' state, characterized by a deep, possibly unresolvable conflict and fragmentation. Shot through with the spectre of authoritarianism (Guided Democracy) or descent into further violence, the final images compulsively dismantle and reformulate their own staging of a 'Hollywood ending,' openly displaying fragmentation as a mark of paradoxical authenticity. Ominously foreshadowing the anti-communist massacres of 1965-1966, from the perspective of the present, Akup's final images begin to visualize the indelible presence of both soldiers and the thousands of ex-military *preman* who would carry out waves of state-sponsored violence, impressing themselves on collective imaginations of Indonesia for decades to come.

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2 The 1950s Filipino *Komiks*-to-Film Adaptation during the Studio Era*

Joyce L. Arriola

Abstract
This chapter explores the relationship between the *komiks* industry and the film industry in the Philippines during the peak of the 1950s studio era. The discussion outlines how stories from *komiks* published in magazines and dedicated publications served as source texts for these films. Drawn from earlier oral, theatre and folkloric sources, the *komiks* funnel story materials towards the films, thereby recycling the success of the texts in previous forms and recreating the genres as means of producing a distinctly Filipino vernacular modernism. It argues that the *komiks*-to-film adaptation highlights the ability of hybrid/adaptive forms to shape the national-popular imaginary.

Keywords: *komiks*-to-film adaptation, studio era, vernacular modernism, national-popular

Introduction

In exploring the beginnings of Southeast Asian national cinemas, Roy Armes observes that Philippine cinema 'offers a full reflection of the country's troubled past and serves as a striking example of the difficulties of establishing a national cinema under colonialism or neocolonial dominance' (Armes 1987, p. 151).

* Portions of this chapter have been presented as a paper at the 14th Science Council of Asia Conference held at the Philippine International Convention Center from 14 to 16 June 2017 under the title 'A Social History of 1950s Filipino Film Adaptation.' The *komiks* stories cited in this chapter are sourced from the Lopez Memorial Museum and Library and from the National Library. The films were sourced from the Kaizen Company for LVN and from kabayancentral.com for Sampaguita Pictures.

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Armes's observation highlights the varied influences upon Filipino cinema: literary and film sources from the colonial era influenced filmmaking considerably, with local filmmakers then building upon this convergence of foreign influences and local expression. A postcolonial reading of Philippine film history highlights this 'counterformation' (David 2000, p. 7) of both Spanish and US colonial influences that nevertheless paradoxically resulted in a distinctly Filipino conception of this media form and the forging of a Filipino identity. As a counterformative discourse, the development of Philippine cinema should therefore be viewed as the narrative of Filipino pioneers and innovators, the genres and stories that they bore, and the sources of those productions.

Drawing on the concept of vernacular modernism from the work of Miriam Hansen (2000), this chapter analyses the practice of *komiks*-to-film adaptation during the studio era in the 1950s. In parallel with the author's previous work (Arriola 2018), this chapter discusses the origins of *komiks*, their adaptation practices, and the role of the two big studios, LVN and Sampaguita, and their respective producers in popularizing films based on *komiks* sources, highlighting how *komiks* and film used the vernacular to re-circulate narratives from various ages of Philippine culture. In doing so, the chapter argues that such films address the condition of the Filipino in the post-war years, engaging with themes that gravitated around national concerns in the 1950s, which, indeed, later became known as the Decade of Philippine Nationalism (Agoncillo 1974).

The Background of *Komiks*

Komiks (a localized version of the English word 'comics') are a serialized form of popular literature that appeared in dedicated publications or in magazines such as *Liwayway* (Dawn), *Ilang-Ilang* (the name of a local flower) and *Bulaklak* (Flower). The *komiks* stories, which were either *wakasan* (complete brief stories) or *tuluyan* (serial episodes), were placed alongside other popular literary forms such as short stories and poetry as well as feature news about stars, films and commercial advertisements. Similar to American comic books, Filipino *komiks* (specifically in the 1950s) often featured stories of superheroes, although such figures also co-existed with story materials drawn from wider local theatrical forms, such as *moro-moro*, *sarswela* and *bodabil*, whose names tell of their derivation from Spanish and American forms.[1] Likewise, literary influence is also evident, including

1 *Moro-moro* or *comedia* is a colonial play that features Christian and Muslim characters. *Sarswela* (vernacular spelling of *zarzuela*) is a musical play. *Awit* and *korido* are literary genres

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from *awit* (dodecasyllabic metrical romance), *korido* (octosyllabic metrical romance), Tagalog novels and other forms that date back to both the Spanish colonial period and older folkloric precolonial sources.

The fantasy-adventure motifs and other elements of 1950s *komiks* and their cinematic rendition drew heavily from the *korido* that once appeared in traditional dramas popular during the Spanish era and early American era. This *korido* came alongside the devotional literature that the Spanish missionaries used to win many converts to Christianity. In many ways, these religious literatures were composed within the framework of the Christian concepts of miracle and morality, and the medieval content of the *korido* that were brought to the *komiks* became central too to the films. Such adaptive 'recycling' functioned as a launch pad for commercially driven *komiks* creators, magazine publishers and film studios. Indeed, *komiks* became one of the sources for the 1950s film industry because it was cheap, popular, readily accessible, and, like cinema, was drawing from stories already familiar to the audience (Burke 2016; Reyes 2009).

As the subjects and themes of the *komiks* film adaptations were drawn from colonial genres such as medieval morality and religious plays, *komiks* were therefore generally perceived as bearers of Filipino core values. The *komiks* stories based on *korido* like Haring Solomon at Reyna Sheba (King Solomon and Queen Sheba, Lamberto Avellana, 1952) and the child-themed *komiks*-into-films like Kerubin (Cherub, Octavio Silos, 1952) and Munting Koronel (Little Colonel, Octavio Silos, 1953) talk of the quest for peace and goodness. They reflected the continuing influence of colonial values that were melded with the native categories of thought. As Soledad Reyes argues: 'Medieval Europe is bodily transported into the pages of the *komiks*, where love is the controlling concept together with traditional fidelity, obedience, and generosity' (1986, p. 174). Attuned to colonial theatre and media that were religious in function, the *komiks* writers and the filmmakers who adapted their works from the 1910s to the 1950s were therefore invoking a long narrative tradition.

The big four studios (Sampaguita, LVN, Premiere and Lebran) produced some 832 films from 1950 to 1959. Based on archival work this author conducted,[2] only 176 films from the 1950s have remained extant. Of the

that were brought by the Spanish missionaries from the early years of colonization and solidified into major streams onto the story content or plots in the nineteenth century.

2 Of these, LVN produced 263 titles while Sampaguita produced 231. The remaining 52 films were split between Premiere (31) and Lebran (21). Of the twelve extant films with extant *komik* sources, six were produced by LVN and the other six by Sampaguita. The six LVN films are Haring Solomon at Reyna Sheba, Kambal-Tuko (Conjoined Twins, F.H. Constantino, 1952),

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176 extant films, only 12 films with extant *komiks* sources remain. The rest of the extant films could have been based on *komiks*, but it is hard to infer from only the titles and without the original *komiks* source. Certainly, *komiks* were not the only narrative source for films at this time, and adaptation also drew upon novels, older films, radio dramas, plays, theatre, folklore, true events and history. Nevertheless, *komiks* historians like Soledad Reyes (2009) refer to the *komiks* as the biggest source of films in the 1950s, but certainly due to the loss of the original *komiks*, it is difficult to prove such a claim. Sadly, no academic or private library collections have preserved these magazines, and only those *komiks* series published in the *Liwayway* magazine, and other remaining copies of *Bulaklak*, *Ilang-Ilang* and *Kislap* survived because the original texts were kept in libraries. Only the film titles can suggest that they were based on *komiks*, affirmed only by interviews conducted with a number of *komiks* writers before they died.

The Aspiration for Philippine Modernity in the Postcolonial 1950s

The 1950s was a decade of both political and cultural nationalism in post-independence Philippines as the country was rebuilding from the destruction wrought by World War II. Three presidents – Elpidio Quirino (1948-1953), Ramon Magsaysay (1953-1957) and Carlos P. Garcia (1957-1961) – sought to strengthen the political institutions after 350 years of colonial rule. Pre-war problems persisted in the form of graft and corruption, nepotism and abuse of power in government. There was also the perception that the United States was exercising neocolonial influence over its former colony due to ongoing military and economic interests in the country (Agoncillo 1974). It was in a context of cultural nationalism, exemplified by the Rizal Bill and the so-called golden age of Philippine cinema in the 1950s that the widespread practice of *komiks*-to-film adaptation took root.

Cultural nationalism was prominent: nationalists like Senator Claro M. Recto crafted the Rizal Bill that mandated the teaching of the life and works

Lapu-Lapu (Lamberto V. Avellana, 1954), Rodrigo de Villa (Gregorio Fernandez, Rempo Urip, 1952), Sohrab at Rustum (Sohrab and Rustum, Nemesio E. Caravana, 1950) and TUCYDIDES (Artemio Marquez, 1954). The six Sampaguita films are Aristokrata (Aristocrat, Olive La Torre, 1954), Bernardo Carpio (Benjamin Resella, Artemio B. Tecson, 1951), Despatsadora (Salesgirl, Tony Cayado, 1955), Kerubin (Cherub, Octavio Silos, 1952), Munting Koronel (Little Colonel, Octavio Silos, 1953) and Tulisang Pugot (Headless Bandit, Octavio Silos, 1952).

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of national hero José Rizal in colleges and universities.[3] Recto's Rizal Bill was a cultural policy that lent vision to other visual, literary and performative artists who felt the need to construct an imaginary for the Filipino postcolonial identity. This identity is engaged in memorializing the past, yet it is also looking forward to a new cultural era that has been characterized by a mix of registers: borrowed yet localized; modern yet vernacularized. Tellingly, it was strongly opposed by the Catholic Church, which saw the vision of nationalism as a threat to its primacy as the foundation of Filipino identity.

Such was the cultural face of Filipino modernity in the 1950s. The enthusiasm for story materials – old and new – was also influenced by other cultural activities in the 1950s. For example, Filipino novelists writing in English became prominent alongside novelists in the vernacular languages.[4] Media forms like television (which began broadcasting in 1953) competed with radio, which continued airing dramas based on European metrical romances. But despite the rise of more modern media forms, oral literature like *duplo* and *balagtasan*[5] remained popular in the provinces and towns during fiestas and other cultural events. Likewise, theatre forms like *moro-moro* or *comedia*, *sarswela* and *bodabil* were still being patronized, although audience numbers were decreasing. Adding to these various post-independence cultural developments, the filmmaking industry also resumed after World War II, revitalizing pre-war studios. In the midst of these shifts in literary and media taste, *komiks* persisted and by the 1950s were a key input of the Philippine film industry.

The 1950s Filipino Film Studio System

Film technology was introduced to the Philippine Islands in 1897, a significant year that represents both the end of Spanish colonization and the eve of US colonization. A local film industry was created through the entrepreneurial work of a number of foreign investors.[6] However, it is the

3 In the early years of cinema, José Rizal was the subject of a number of films. His novels *Noli Me Tángere* and *El Filibusterismo* were adapted into a number of films.

4 The Philippines has some 130 ethnolinguistic groups.

5 *Duplo* is 'a verbal debate or joust between two groups' (Coseteng and Nemenzo 1975, p. 38) performed in funeral wakes in rural Philippines during the Spanish period but came into disuse as new media came along to supplant folk media. *Balagtasan* is also another form of poetic debate revolving around an issue and is characterized by a display of wit and the use of elegant language.

6 Early foreign investors in film technology and projection in the Philippines included Messrs. Leibman and Peritz, who showed Lumière films in 1897. Señor Pertierra held his first screening

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native pioneers before World War II and the studios of the post-war years who were responsible for reconfiguring Philippine cinema into what it has become: localized, dynamic and, most importantly, drawing upon both foreign and local story materials that were rich enough to animate the people's visual and literary imagination.[7] In the 1950s studios like LVN and Sampaguita realized a vernacular Filipino cinema by incorporating the popular *komiks* as source materials.

Studio specialization dictated which *komiks* stories to adapt. Like the 'vertically integrated' Hollywood model (Cook 1985, p. 10), the Philippine studio system operated as an oligopoly, with a handful of families and entrepreneurs dominating the industry in the 1950s. Philippine studios of the 1950s were engaged in almost all aspects of production, distribution and exhibition. The studios – LVN, Sampaguita, Premiere and Lebran – were run by executives who designed a system to control all creative output. This also required 'long-term planning' (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1994) in establishing a workable relationship with theatre bookers and theatre houses. Sampaguita Pictures specialized in 'youth movies' like Munting Koronel and Despatsadora (Salesgirl, Tony Cayado, 1955); LVN in 'costume pictures' like Sohrab at Rustum (Sohrab and Rustum, Nemesio Caravana, 1950) and Rodrigo de Villa (Gregorio Fernandez and Rempo Urip, 1952); Premiere in 'action films and crime stories' like Bandido (Rebel, Ramon Estella, 1950) and Ang Sawa Sa Lumang Simboryo (Python in the Old Bell Tower, Gerardo de León, 1952); and, Lebran in 'Western classics, the Bible, and ancient history' like Sigfredo (Manuel Conde, 1951) and Kalbario ni Hesus (Calvary of Jesus, Carlos Vander Tolosa, 1952) (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1994, p. 40). While the magazine industry, which promoted the *komiks*, and the film industry relied on each other for survival during the 1950s, towards the end of the 1950s, new genres were becoming more salient than others and new sources for cinema emerged. Although *komiks* stories were still major precursor texts for the movie screen, other literary and extra-literary sources emerged to supply cinema with storylines.

LVN Pictures derived its name from fellow co-founders Narcisa Buencamino vda. de León, Carmen Villongco, and Eleuterio Navoa. The studio has been credited for producing almost one-half of the all the films released in the 1950s. A great number of their *korido*-inspired films used the *komiks* as

in Escolta in 1898. The earliest film producers were foreigners, namely Edward Meyer Gross and Albert Yearsley.

7 José Nepomuceno was the first Filipino to produce a film: Dalagang Bukid (Country Maiden, 1919), which was based on a *sarswela*.

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the film's structuring device. Their notable production SOHRAB AT RUSTUM followed closely the Nemesio Caravana *komiks* story. The contribution of LVN Pictures to the 1950s studio system and to Filipino film history, in general, has always been largely attributed to Doña Sisang (Narcisa Buencamino vda. de León), LVN's president upon its establishment in 1938. She served as LVN's executive producer until 1961 when the studio system was beginning to break up. Monina Mercado reported in the book *Doña Sisang and Filipino Movies* that 'she worked on every detail: story, script, cast, director, music, costume and editing' (1977, p. 6). Doña Sisang's management style was hands-on and all-encompassing: 'Like the strong-willed matriarch that she was, Doña Sisang made everybody's business her business – at least in the LVN studio compound where her tight-knit "family" converged. Her sharp eye for detail missed nothing and with that, she worked as movie producer' (Mercado 1977, p. 54). Moreover, Doña Sisang was not only responsible for selecting the literary sources for her films; she was also involved in many other activities of production, such as watching the daily rushes, critiquing her directors' work for the day, costume fittings and scouting new faces to join her company's roster of stars. Doña Sisang made sure that her ideas shaped the form and content of LVN films, including deciding the *komiks* sources of the films she produced. Scholar and filmmaker Clodualdo del Mundo Jr (2012) says that the matriarch's love for *awit* and *korido* was the reason for the great quantity of costume pictures or historical films that were released by LVN, not to mention her interest in music, which also made musical numbers, complete with full orchestral arrangements, an indispensable feature in her movies.

Doña Sisang's preference for the romance, musical and historical genres is also reflected in the materials that her company drew from the *komiks* sources. Of the twelve identified extant films with extant *komiks* sources, six were produced by LVN. Three of the six LVN films – HARING SOLOMON AT REYNA SHEBA, RODRIGO DE VILLA and SOHRAB AT RUSTAM – were based on a *korido*.[8] The sources of these films attest to the broad and long-running influence of Spanish colonial forms.

LVN's rival company, Sampaguita Pictures, represents another variation of the producer's role in the formation of genres and of audiences in the 1950s. Founded earlier than LVN Pictures in 1937, Sampaguita Pictures was a product of the fortunate collaboration between members of the Vera family and a number of entrepreneurs who gambled on the idea of a film-producing

8 RODRIGO DE VILLA was the first 'international' co-production and direction was shared between Filipinos and Indonesians. The Indonesian version was produced by Persari Film.

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company. Sampaguita would draw from earlier sources like the *sarswela* in Bituing Marikit (Beautiful Star, Carlos Tolosa, 1937), the first of the musicals that the production firm would release in the next couple of years. During the war years, Sampaguita did not produce any movies but in 1946, under the management of Judge Jose Vera, it released So Long, America (Gerardo de León). After the war, the company would be drawing more frequently from pre-existing forms. In the 1950s, Sampaguita sourced out *komiks* and radio stories with more frequency because these 'were saleable and accessible to the public' (Francia 2003, p. 101). The studio bought the story rights of the *komiks* creations of famous writers such as Mars Ravelo (*Darna*) and Francisco Coching (*El Indio*). In addition, the creative team not only worked around more contemporary themes but also drew heavily from *komiks* sources (Francia 2003), which inspired films like Bernardo Carpio (Artemeio Tecson and Benjamin Resella, 1951), Tulisang Pugot (Headless Bandit, Octavio Silos, 1952), Kerubin, Munting Koronel, Aristokrata (Aristocrat, Olive La Torre, 1952) and Despatsadora. Francia (2003) lists some 40 films based on *komiks* sources made in the 1950s. In a way, Sampaguita complemented LVN by working on themes that the other film companies would not touch. If LVN focused on sourcing *komiks* based on *korido* and folklore, Sampaguita focused on *komiks* stories that tackled contemporary family and women's themes. This fact partly identified the studios with particular genres and themes that they promoted through their filmographies and advertising plans.

On 4 January 1951, Sampaguita suffered a major setback when a fire gutted its studio. Aside from the film facilities, the studio lost five pre-war films that were eventually re-shot. Of these, Bernardo Carpio was based on a *komiks* story by Fausto Galauran (Arriola 2014).[9] Roberta (Mars Ravelo, 1951), a film based on the *komiks* story of Mars Ravelo, was exhibited and grossed Php 14,000 on its opening day, becoming a certified blockbuster.[10] It was a film based in *komiks* that helped the company regain its losses.

By the 1960s, the industry saw the break-up of the studio system and the rise of independent filmmakers which signalled the dwindling but not entirely diminished collaboration between the magazine industry and the studios. The *CCP Encyclopedia of Art* (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1994) cites the labour unrest at Premiere Productions as one of the reasons for the rise of independent filmmakers and the decline of the studio system. LVN

9 For a complete list of Sampaguita films adapted from *komiks*, see Appendix C in Francia (2003, pp. 148-154).

10 At the time Php 14,000 was equivalent to USD 7,000. Accounting for inflation, this is about USD 70,000 in 2020.

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would be competing with many players in the field. After two decades – in 1980 – LVN would bow out to new film companies which held a different view from the 1950s studio heads towards the role of studios in the whole art and commerce of filmmaking.

Industry of Adaptation

Both LVN Pictures and Sampaguita Pictures created formulas by responding to popular taste or introducing new materials. Altman (1999, p. 44) describes the role of the producer in creating genre as an 'ex post facto operation,' in which they interpret market information and apply their critical insights to new production decisions. In both circumstances, the *komiks* sources had a significant role to play because they dictated the film genres that the studio concentrated on.

In adapting *komiks*, producers took note of the genres of the sources and tried to recreate those in the film adaptations. Bernardo Carpio, Sohrab at Rustum, Haring Solomon at Reyna Sheba and Rodrigo de Villa are *korido*-costume pieces; Tulisang Pugot and Tucydides (Artemio Marquez, 1954) are fantasy-adventure; Lapu-Lapu (Lamberto V. Avellana, 1954) is a historical romance; Aristokrata and Despatsadora are women's films; Kerubin and Munting Koronel are child-themed melodramas; and Kambal-Tuko (Conjoined Twins, F.H. Constantino, 1952) is a personality comedy. The same affect and effect were recreated in the movies; with slight variations on the plot (abridgement and expansions) as the filming process tackled limitations on budget and film length and duration requirements for the exhibition.

On some rare occasions, story endings may be altered, such as the more optimistic ending for Aristokrata, which tackles in passing agrarian issues in the 1950s and departing a bit from the gloomy conclusion of the *komiks* version. In addition, alterations may be made to affirm the status quo. For example, an episode in the *komiks* version of Tulisang Pugot pertaining to the Katipunan (a resistance movement during the Spanish era) subplot was edited in the film in order to meet film-duration requirements and, probably, in order to avoid tackling its political subthemes that may find resemblance to the issue of banditry in the 1950s.

Komik authors like Clodualdo del Mundo and Nemesio Caravana would submit stories in both dedicated and mixed-format magazines. At the same time, they would be asked to either prepare the screenplays of the *komiks* story or direct the film versions. On some occasions, film producers enlisted

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the cooperation of *komiks* creators to assist in translating the *komiks* stories into film. For example, Francisco Coching did art production sketches and costume design for the film version of Lapu-Lapu, working closely with director Lamberto Avellana.

This relationship between the two industries created a formula for sourcing materials and shaping target texts as the same genres mentioned above kept on appearing on the producers' list of projects, not to mention the anticipation created in the readers' and viewers' minds as they waited for new material; thus, the same titling decisions (one-liner modifiers like Aristokrata and Despatsadora to signal the emphasis on the woman's story in what else but the women's film genre). The synergy or cross-promotion between the industries is evident in the fact that the copyright of some stories running in the magazines were already being bought by film studios even before they ended their run. For instance, in the last remaining episodes of a *komik* series, the final panel usually bears a footnote or caption that states '*Kasalukuyang isinasapelikula ng LVN*' (Currently being filmed by LVN) or '*Kasalukuyang isinasapelikula ng Sampaguita*' (Currently being filmed by Sampaguita).

The studios of the 1950s took advantage of viewers' propensity to draw from cultural memory in recasting film genres. For example, the *awit* and *korido* pieces like Bernardo Carpio, Sohrab at Rustum, Haring Solomon at Reyna Sheba and Rodrigo de Villa became period pieces or costume pieces and historical dramas. Although set in faraway Western or Eastern kingdoms, the characters speak Tagalog.[11] This use of Tagalog, the enlistment of local actors and, most importantly, the inclusion of a musical sequence using the genre of the *kundiman* (love song bearing a sentimental affect) which is originally composed for the films are all expressions of vernacular modernism. For example, all four of the films mentioned above featured an average of two to three musical sequences that articulated the love relationships drawn from the *komiks* and then rendered through songs in the films. In view of this, the love angle would be expanded even if this were minimal in the original *korido* material.

The studios also mediated between the *komiks* industry and the film industry by actively seeking stories that could migrate from one form to another. The result of this generic mediation is a mixture of formulas and affect. As co-creators, studios engaged in sourcing, adapting and recycling and in the process translated, updated and occasionally parodied a repertoire of stories and genres.

11 Tagalog is the language of the native people of Luzon Island.

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An example would be Bernardo Carpio, an *awit* transplanted from Europe probably through the galleon trade that plied the Acapulco-Manila route. However, it was recycled in the nineteenth century into a Filipino legend. In the 1950s, it was read in high school texts sometimes as 'epic,' sometimes as 'metrical tale,' and sometimes as 'legend.' The *komiks* series by Fausto Galauran sets the time in the 1890s (instead of mythical time in Spain) and introduces the protagonist as a mestizo (son of a Spanish peninsular and a native woman) and went from being an exile to the Philippines to being a proto-liberator. Today, Bernardo Carpio is one of the Philippines's most popular folk heroes. The national-popular here becomes a site of contestation where a mix of registers – a platform for resistance, of tropes, of allegories – bring in a confluence of meanings. Forgacs (1993) calls this kind of scenario a 'double terminological slide,' wherein the 'national' replaced the 'international' provenance of the story. Europe is replaced by the national (Philippines) and the 'proletarian' (the rebel Bernardo Carpio) is replaced by the 'popular' (the mythical King of the Tagalogs).

Alongside the adaptation of *komiks* into film, adaptation practices that engaged other creative industries operated in parallel to the cinema industry such as magazines that serialized *komiks* (comics series) or which were solely devoted to *komiks*. Moreover, the studios also reinvigorated a practice that has been in place in the early years of the film industry – sourcing materials from precursor texts and reworking these around new contexts. For example, the *koridos* transplanted in *komiks* and later in film point to Filipino values in the 1950s – rather than their nineteenth-century colonial contexts – that sometimes brought some emendations on the plot and character development. Bernardo Carpio, for instance, is an *awit* that has been adapted in various forms where instead of a Spanish hero, the protagonist undergoes numerous incarnations as a peninsular (a Spaniard born in Spain but living in the Philippines for a long time), an insular (a Spaniard raised in the Philippines), and a mestizo (a product of a union between a Spaniard and a native). He went from being a champion of Spanish reforms to being a '*Hari ng mga Tagalog*' (King of the Tagalogs), depending on the intention of the retelling.

The practice of *komiks*-to-film adaptation is further supported by another practice that is more of an intertextual collage. Filipino popular culture has always mixed genres and narratives from various periods (precolonial, colonial and postcolonial; across art forms and cultural expressions) into a hybrid, one that is represented symbolically by the local tropical dessert called '*halo-halo*,' which literally means 'mixed-mixed.' Such merging of tradition and change, old and new, and foreign and local can be described as

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'vernacular modernism': 'a cultural counterpart and response to technological, economic and social modernity' (Hansen 2000, pp. 10-11). In her analysis of Shanghai cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, Miriam Hansen gives a description of this mixing that is also appropriate to 1950s Philippine cinemas:

> a distinct brand of vernacular modernism, one that evolved in a complex relation to American – and other foreign-models while drawing on and transforming [native] traditions in theatre, literature, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular. (2000, p. 13)

Such vernacular modernism is also evident in the multiple stages of modification the local *komiks* texts went through before they were eventually adapted into popular feature films. For example, films like Bernardo Carpio, Sohrab at Rustum, Haring Solomon at Reyna Sheba, and Rodrigo de Villa, were drawn from European metrical romances. However, when circulated in the Philippines in the nineteenth century, the stories were produced in pamphlet form and peddled in church squares, so already reflecting mediation by and influence from native translators. These were performed as morality plays in town *fiestas* (feasts) at the height of the Spanish era, and indeed such romances came to the Philippines by way of Mexico through the galleon trade, and so had already undergone several stages of alterations from their source text. The versions that were printed in the *komiks* were therefore already a half-century apart from the storylines that circulated in the nineteenth century. They were either abridged or expanded by local poets such as José Corazón de Jesús and then re-imagined in the pages of the *komiks* in the 1950s through new contexts or exigencies. By the time the film versions were produced, these romances had therefore already undergone various mediations.

The vernacular modernism exemplified by the practice of *komiks*-to-film adaptation is key to shaping a popular imaginary that also points to a sense of nation. David Forgacs considers the 'national-popular' artistic style as 'a sort of slogan for forms of art that were rooted both in the national tradition and in popular life' (1993, p. 179). Within the Philippine context, the notion of national-popular is relevant to vernacular modernism because it involves the deployment of local stories and styles derived from borrowed popular forms. In the case of 1950s *komiks*-to-film adaptation, the *komiks* are 'rooted in the national tradition' as they are a continuation or offshoot of forms already entrenched in narrative culture which then morph into another form (or media) to reflect the allegories of 'popular life.' For example, despite their (originally) foreign stories, the metrical romances mentioned above resonate

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with important themes and values to Filipino viewers in the 1950s: national identity (SOHRAB AT RUSTUM); family centredness and a sense of shame (RODRIGO DE VILLA); and treachery (HARING SOLOMON AT REYNA SHEBA).

The *komiks*-to-film texts often also displace the original themes in order to accommodate the world view of the 1950s generation, an example being the *komiks*-to-film adaptation SOHRAB AT RUSTUM. This film reflects an 'ideological/signifying practice' (Cowie 1998, p. 180) in the form of romance/heroic literature that affirms traditional values doubling as a commercial formula. The text is a retelling of a Persian epic that has been recast as a Tagalog *korido* during the Spanish era; adapted as storybook material for children and young adults throughout the American period; rendered visually in *komiks* in the 1950s; and, adapted into an LVN film where the material bears the registers of a period romance that features a number of musical numbers.

Within this purview, the choices of materials for adaptation in the 1950s were sourced from various periods of the narrative tradition of the Filipinos and they were reflected in the studios' idea of 'national-popular,' which was also infused into a business model or strategy. The filmmaking practice of the 1950s and its adaptive resources became a mix of instances; namely: of profit, of invoking a narrative tradition and of recycling and sourcing texts and mapping their afterlife.

Conclusion

The 1950s was an important era of *komiks*-to-film adaptation in the Philippines due to both the great quantity of films produced and the innovation of producers in sourcing materials to turn into proverbial blockbusters. In part, this happened because of the active exchange between the *komiks* creators and the filmmakers. The film industry took advantage of the wide following of magazines like *Liwayway*, which carried *komiks* stories, and of the dedicated publications too. It offered the films as destination texts of *komiks* and its older sources; since the *komiks* sources of cinema were drawing from a narrative tradition that in turn drew intertextually from the colonial years (*awit*, *korido*, *sarswela*, *moro-moro*, morality plays), from folklore, and from popular culture. And thus, the *korido komiks*/films mentioned and discussed above are examples of such hybrid texts.

By acknowledging the importance of the *komiks* industry as a source of precursor materials and as a means of creating new stories, this chapter has indicated how the film culture of the Philippines became a site in

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which such borrowed materials and folk sources were retranslated into new forms and contexts, characterizing this as a form of vernacular modernism. The film adaptations of *komiks* function as a form of historical continuity merging new forms of media and entertainment – one print and one filmic – and summoning remembered materials from narrative culture that easily made their way into the source texts of film. In this case, vernacular modernism pertains to the melding of textualities (*komiks* and film and their precursor texts) from popular culture while still being rooted in a sense of nation signified by the themes of freedom, loyalty and service in the *korido*-based *komiks*-to-film adaptations as well as the unifying impact of Tagalog-speaking cinema.

This chapter has indicated that producers indirectly controlled aesthetic decisions in the 1950s, in both the area of film themes and technical aspects. The films therefore became a continuation of a long narrative tradition while also creating a Philippine version of vernacular modernism. This vernacular modernism is reflected in the sourcing of both native and colonial materials with influences from local folklore. The result is the national-popular which in this case may be ascribed to the deployment of popular media (*komiks*, film) to remediate a narrative culture (*korido*, traditional theatre, folklore) that reflects a notion of nation integral to the world views current in the 1950s. Whether this world view reflected the aims of the republic or they mirrored the situation of ordinary Filipinos, the *komiks*-to-film adaptation, aided by the studios, became part of the filmic tradition that would both impact upon latter-day development in filmmaking and solidify a golden age that filmmakers, filmgoers and scholars still look back upon with fondness.

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3 Pearl Tears on the Silver Screen

War Movies and Expanding Burmese[1] Militarism in the Early Independence Years

Jane M. Ferguson

Abstract

The early years of Burmese postcolonial independence (1948) saw a tremendous expansion of the Tatmadaw (Burmese Armed Forces) predicated on an ongoing civil war and the Kuomintang 'incursion' in the northeastern Shan State. The same years comprised the beginning of the so-called 'golden age' of Burmese cinema. Amidst films of various genres, historical fiction war films glorifying Burmese soldiers and peasants as heroes, and constructing archetypes of enemies to the country's independence marked an important shift from earlier colonial-era nationalist films which had sought to reclaim Burmese sovereignty by harking back to the grandeur of prior Burmese dynasties. Instead, while war experiences are homogenized and enemies are stereotyped, national heroes were now created as part of a post-independence political milieu.

Keywords: Burma, war films, nation-building, Cold War

'When the war is over, I will come back to you,' Seya Kyaw assures his village sweetheart, Ama. The young woman, in tears, responds to her soldier lover, 'I promise, we will be together.' And with these sad, but hopeful words the final scene of the 1962 Burmese war drama, Pule Myit Yee (Pearl Tears, Kyaw Swe), henceforth referred to as Pearl Tears, is brought to a close. Loosely based on the plot of the Ernest Hemingway novel set during the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), Pearl Tears depicts

1 The government officially changed the country's international name to Myanmar in 1989; consistent with this, it will be referred to as 'Burma' prior to that year and as 'Myanmar' after.

Khoo, Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (eds), *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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the travails of platoons of the Burmese Army, the Tatmadaw, as they are despatched into territory held by the invading Kuomintang or *tayoukpyu* 'white Chinese' during the 1950s.

Although the political role of the Tatmadaw is explicit following General Ne Win's coup and subsequent Revolutionary Council, later Burmese Socialist Programme Party, regimes, the fourteen years between independence in 1948 and Ne Win's coup in 1962 comprised the period in which the Tatmadaw expanded and consolidated its power. The very same period coincided with significant government investment in and a major flourishing of the Burmese motion picture industry.

With postcolonial independence in the aftermath of World War II came new ideological directives, stressing national unity in the context of the country's ongoing internal conflict. As such, the Burmese culture industries were selectively tasked with two related ideological projects: to laud the Tatmadaw as the key to the establishment (and protection) of an ethnically united, newly independent nation; and to characterize the enemies of that national project, presenting those enemies in the form of threatening foreigners, be they soldiers or capitalists.

Therefore, this chapter will first present an overview of the motion picture industry in Burma/Myanmar, its political agendas and thematic patterning of films, up to and after independence. Then, discussion will move to the state of the Burmese motion picture industry in the historical context of the country's civil war and expanding military during the parliamentary democracy period. Next, it will focus on two well-known and popularly received Burmese historical fiction war films, Pearl Tears[2] and Nga Ba[3] (The Peasant Nga Ba, Chit Khin) released in 1962 and 1961, respectively. Reflecting on the films' thematic and social relevance in this newly independent Southeast Asian nation at the brink of a military coup, this chapter will consider what these war films might have meant to Burmese cinemagoers, their country caught in the crossfire of Cold War geopolitics and civil war.

Through historical discussion, this chapter will describe the ways in which cinema production has been an important mass communication strategy which Burmese politicians and claims-makers have used to bolster nationalist sentiments in the face of perceived outside threats. Because

2 This essay follows the official Okell system of transliteration from Burmese into English. In Burmese: ပုလဲမျှတ်ရည်.

3 In Burmese: ငဘ. Nga Ba is the name of the protagonist. The English title of the novel was 'The Peasant Nga Ba.'

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key political players in the early independence years (including U Nu and Aung San) were involved in the film industry during the colonial period, it is invaluable to draw upon cinematic history from the colonial period to examine how filmmakers might have framed their craft to advocate for national unity in the postcolonial years.

Burma's strategic position of neutrality amidst other geopolitical alignments offers a compelling case study of the machinations of culture industries within a national context during the height of some of the Cold War's political tensions in the region.[4] Although Burma did not explicitly take one side, its neutrality came as a result of a political and economic strategic logic, and as the Burmese military sought increased domination, they turned to the 'hearts and minds' psychological potential of the culture industries.[5]

While the motion picture industry in Burma was not always a direct apparatus of the state, we can trace the ways in which political actors and politicians, some long-connected with politically inclined filmmakers from the colonial period, sought to make use of mass communication to further their own political agendas, and later, how the state directly sponsored the industry. Filmmaking is first and foremost a capitalist industry designed to make profit. But there are multiple historical examples of film production putting profit secondary to output and ideological dissemination (Soviet film quotas being a prime example). In Burma, even before the thorough nationalization of the economy – which came as a result of the inception of the Revolutionary Council in the early 1960s – the newly independent government was keen to promote certain kinds of ideological films, and gave hefty grants and incentives to filmmakers to create works geared to promote national unity.

Burmese Filmmaking: A Brief Overview

Despite the presence of bricks-and-mortar cinemas in the country for over a century, and indigenous film production dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century, there are few international scholarly works about

4 This is not intended to suggest, however, that all works on the cultural ramifications of the Cold War necessarily accept this ideological binary 'block' representation.

5 Diffrient has argued that 'no country other than South Korea (and possibly Taiwan) went so far as to institutionalize anticommunism as a categorical imperative through the implementation of (motion picture) industry-wide standards and protection policies' (2005, p. 22).

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the Burmese motion picture industry. In addition to historical issues around access for international researchers (to both the country as well as the films), there is no systematic film archive such as those present in other Southeast Asian nations. Likewise, many older films are considered to be lost films (due to deterioration or misplacement) and some classic films were simply sold to be stripped for their silver content. Hundreds of surviving films from the 1950s, 1960s and onwards have been adapted for broadcast on MRTV (Myanmar Radio and Television) and therefore saved on Betamax in the early 1980s. Later, they were digitized, making at least some more easily accessible. Personal interviews with industry insiders and movie fans can offer invaluable insight and context, while private collections of old Burmese film magazines and other purchased Burmese secondary sources can fill in some wider details about otherwise lost films.

The motion picture industry in Burma/Myanmar can be periodized according to five eras: the colonial era (1920-1947); the early independence/parliamentary democracy era (1948-1961); the Ne Win era (1962-1988); the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) era (1989-2010) (Ferguson 2012, p. 15); and, finally, the post-elections 'transition' era (2011-present). These periods in film history coincide with the political regimes in power, as governments framed the political economy of the film industry. The regimes operated censor boards to control content, and mediated the country's relationship with the global economy, affecting whether foreigners were allowed to participate in the film industry (let alone the broader economy).

Film production in Burma started before 1920 and due to Burma's historic cultural and bureaucratic ties with India (Burma was ruled as a province of British India until 1937), the two countries' cinema industries were intertwined during their early decades. Burmese films were subject to colonial censorship laws drafted in Calcutta, while cinemas in colonial Rangoon were also largely owned by Indian entrepreneurs. Rangoon cinemas screened Indian films, and many films were made in collaboration with studios in India. Burmese studios (including those that collaborated with their Indian counterparts) produced a total of 640 films of various lengths by 1939 (ဆွန်းလှိုင် 2000, p. 187).

Early Burmese films dealt with stories of love or fairy tales, often with thinly veiled lessons regarding Buddhist notions of morality. Members of the burgeoning local middle-class intelligentsia and student activist movement became involved in what was seen as an exciting new medium in the 1920s and 1930s. Some overtly political films were produced, including those with nationalist, anti-colonial and anti-foreign agendas. Prominent student

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activists from the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association), who would later go on to have key roles in the movement for Burmese independence, dabbled in political filmmaking during the 1930s. For instance: U Nu (who would later become the first prime minister of the Union of Burma) co-directed a documentary, Boycotta[6] (Boycott, U Ba Zin and U Nu, 1937) on the topic of the students' involvement in the independence struggle. The film featured appearances by other prominent student radicals, namely Aung San, Hla Maung Kyi and Htun Ohn (မြန်မာ့ရုပ်ရှင်စိန်ရတုသဘင်ကျင်ရုပ်ရှင်စာတမ်းငယ်တစ်ဆယ် [hereafter 'မ.ရ.စ.'] 1996, p. 254).

The studio most associated with anti-colonial resistance was U Sunny's Parrot Film Productions, which produced a total of 92 films during its years of operation between 1931 and 1957 (Arkar Moe 2009). Some films were more political than others, and examples of anti-colonial films produced during the colonial period include: Do Daung Lan (Our Peacock Flag, U Sunny, 1936), Bo Aung Kyaw (Leader Aung Kyaw, U Sunny, 1938), and Daung Danka (Peacock Coin, U Sunny, 1931)[7] (မြ နမာ့နိုင်ငံရုပ်ရှင်အစည်းအရုံး 2004, 140). Filmmakers' use of peacock symbolism is a direct reference to the flag of the Konbaung dynasty, the regime overthrown by the British in the previous century. It became the symbol of resistance to colonial rule.

Such explicit political content did not go unnoticed. The colonial censor board had the power both to cut scenes (and to block entire films) prior to cinema release if they deemed them politically objectionable. Further to this, should a previously approved film stir controversy after release, the censor board retained the right to pull the film from further public screening. One example of the latter was A1 Film Company's 1937 production, Aung Thapyay[8] (The Triumph at Thapyay/Victory Flower, U Nyi Pu, 1937). Written by U Tin Maung, the film dramatizes the final days of the reign of King Thibaw of the Konbaung dynasty, his violent ousting by the British and ultimate exile in Ratanagiri, India. Although the film was released to the cinemas, it provoked unrest in Monywa, whereupon the police ordered the cinema to close showings of the film. Upon secondary review of the entire film, the censor board decided to pull the film from all of the cinemas throughout the country (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, pp. 251-252).

In their politically themed films, Burmese nationalists invoked Burman history, Buddhist morality (and the perils of its transgression) and notions of the Burman right to the throne as part of their anti-colonial rhetoric. Some of

6 In Burmese: ဘို့ဂျင်ကော့တာ.
7 In Burmese: ဒို့ဒေါင်းလံ ၊ ဗိုလ်အောင်ကျော် ၊ ဒေါင်းဒင်္ဂါး.
8 In Burmese: အောင်သပြေ.

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these films took a harsh stance towards foreign capitalists, particularly Indians. Although many members of these anti-colonial organizations were actively embracing Marxist ideologies as part of a struggle against British imperialism, there is little mention of the cross-ethnic pluralism we see in later films as a means to a politically independent end. In Aung Thapyay, for example, there is mention of a Shan princess, but this is treated as more of an instance of the statecraft of the age than an actual thematic push for cross-ethnic solidarity. In other words, the use of intermarriage between monarchs in pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia was not based on ethnic mixing for the purposes of national unity, but rather, was a way of keeping potentially opposing monarchs at bay,[9] and this in particular film did not specifically advocate cross-ethnic solidarity as some Burmese films would in decades to come.

World War II, Fledgling Independence and New Ideological Challenges

The aerial attacks on Rangoon in December 1941, followed by the land invasion of the Burma Independence Army (BIA), reinforced – and ultimately controlled – by the Japanese Imperial Army, would bring the cinema industry to an abrupt halt. Many cinema halls were Indian-owned during the colonial period, and with the British retreat in 1942, resident Indians were forced to leave Burma. For hundreds of thousands of people, it was a brutal and harrowing exodus. A cohort of Burmese filmmakers supported the BIA, but during the occupation, most of them got involved in other aspects of wartime commerce instead of filmmaking. One interesting exception, however, was that local filmmakers with ties to the BIA made documentary newsreels of the taking of Rangoon (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 256).

In the years of the Japanese occupation, the once bustling Burmese film industry saw little action. In addition to the disruption of the former economic networks for acquisition of film stock and processing chemicals, the war left many studios bereft of production equipment. It had been seized by the Japanese. A few cinemas kept active by continuing to show older films. There had been Japanese involvement in Burmese cinema prior to World War II,[10] but the war years saw a change in what was shown on the screens in Burma. Yadanarpone Cinema in Sanchaung was taken

9 For more detail about this kind of historical statecraft, see Tun Aung Chain (1999).

10 For example: the 1935 A1 film Japan Yin Thwe ဂျပန်ရင်သွေး (Japanese Darling, Nyi Pu, 1935), was shot in Japan and co-produced by PCL (Ferguson 2018).

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over and renamed 'Sakura.' As such, it was dedicated to showing Japanese samurai films and political propaganda reels. While most film companies ceased production altogether, the largest film company, A1 – with family connections to the Burma Independence Army – managed to produce Pama Lout Lab Yay Maw Gon Tin[11] (Vision for an Independent Burma, U Kyin Sein, 1944) in 1943-1944. Directed by U Kyin Sein, and largely considered to be a propaganda film, it was released at the Orient Film Hall during the Japanese occupation period (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, pp. 236, 263-266, 268).

Following the end of the war, and the return of (temporary) colonial rule, on 8 March 1946 a group of key industry players got together to establish the Burma Motion Picture Organization. Their meeting also commemorated 25 years of film production in the country, celebrating what they called its silver anniversary. One year later, General Aung San presided over the commemorative ceremony for the film industry near Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. In his speech, he urged the filmmakers to consider national goals in their approach to the craft:

> It is only recently that Burma gained independence. It is the people's responsibility to work for the establishment and development of the nation. The filmmaking community has a responsibility as well; the film artists have the responsibility to work for the benefit of the people. (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 257)

Soon after independence in 1948, the new Burmese government established a Public Relation Film Service and allotted the then-hefty sum of four million kyat for the organization of a new motion picture group to purchase filmmaking equipment. One of their first productions was the black-and-white documentary, Our Union[12] (Public Relation Film Service, 1948). In addition to their investment in filmmaking equipment, this organization sought the skills of international filmmakers to share their expertise with participants in the burgeoning Burmese film industry (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 155). In the years immediately following the war, five new film companies were founded: Swe Burma, Hlit Sit (Electric), Aung Zeya, Thit Hsan and New Burma (တက္ကသိုလ်ခင်မောင်ဇော် 2012, 11).

At independence, Burma is noted for having one of the most vibrant public media scenes in Southeast Asia (Allott 1993, p. 4), with numerous independent newspapers, magazines and radio stations in operation. Similar

11 In Burmese: ဗမာ့လွတ်လပ်ရေးမော်ကွန်းတင်.
12 In Burmese: ဒို့ပြည်ထောင်စု.

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to other Southeast Asian nations, film production gradually increased in the post-war years: Burmese studios produced thirteen films in 1946, 48 in 1947, 56 in 1948 and 41 in 1949. Also of note is the increased use of recorded 'talkie' pictures in this period. Although sound-on-film technology was used in film production Burma beginning in 1935, silent films as well as sound-on-disc persisted due to their lower production costs and existing popularity of in-house cinema music ensembles.

By the end of the 1940s, a total of twelve stylistic genres of Burmese films were recognized and in production, with genre names such as: 'Love and Marriage Stories,' 'Love and Fanciful Dress,' and 'History and Biography' (မ.ရ.စ . 1996, p. 62). In addition to love dramas, there were films regarding Buddhist biography stories as well as genres of Burmese socialist realism which could be interpreted as propaganda reels for the newly independent nation. Writing in 1972, one Burmese film scholar, Myat Swe, critiqued the film industry during the parliamentary democracy period as one which was made for the economic benefit of those involved, while producing 'poisonous entertainment' for the workers and farmers (the involvement of foreign capitalists in the industry also meant that much of this revenue went overseas). The scholar points out that of the 53 films produced in 1951, 32 of them had ghosts, fairy tales, *nats*[13] and superstition. For Myat Swe, such content evidently represented a movement away from 'real film,' so reflecting a distain for popular entertainment from the intelligentsia and social elites that is also seen in other Southeast Asian nations at this time (မြတ်ဆွေ 1972, pp. 11-12).

During the 1950s, rather than leave the film industry entirely to the whims of the market, including ever-present Hollywood and Bollywood features, the Burmese government began in earnest to systematize the industry, and connect it more closely with its political goals. And as for the structure of the local industry, as was pointed out in 1950, in nine cases out of ten, within a Burmese studio, the director, scriptwriter and producer were the same person (Thoung Sein 1950, p. 7). Part of the government's goals were to expand, yet at the same time, consolidate the industry. Prime Minister U Nu appointed U Thant to chair the Burma Film Board (Charney 2009). One major step was to bring everyone together in a ritual celebration of filmic achievements: the year 1952 saw the establishment of the Burmese Academy Awards[14] with 13 October celebrated as Burma's National Film Day.

13 *Nats* are the lingering ghosts of people who died a violent or untimely death.

14 In its first year of operation, the Academy Awards regaled an A1 Film Company production, Chit Thet Way (Dear Thet Way, 1952), directed by U Tin Maung as 'Best Film.' Its lead actress, long-time film star, Kyi Kyi Tay, won the year's 'Best Female Star' for her role in the film (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 63).

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Five years later, on 18 October 1957, Minister of Information Thakhin Chit Maung held a meeting with members of the Motion Picture Organization. The ministry was concerned with the state of the industry in general and the importation of film equipment, in particular. By that time, 'talkies' had entirely replaced silent and sound-on-disc productions. But, there was the constant worry amongst Burmese filmmakers – then as now – that their productions would not be able to compete with the technical sophistication of their Hollywood counterparts.

To give space for Burmese films, government intervention mandated that cinemas in the country show national productions for at least 60 days out of the year (Lent 1990, p. 222). Furthermore, and in consultation with the Ministry of Trade, it was decided that there should be a reduction in the taxation of film equipment imports, with the intention that this would continue to stimulate film production domestically (ရုပ်ရှင်ဗဟေသာ 1957). The film industry would then finally reach its productive apex in 1962, with 92 films produced that year, a success largely due to government investment and assistance in this private industry. Such support upgraded the country's filmmaking technologies in the form of better sound-recording equipment and visual techniques, including background projection (ရွှေဝေတီရုပ်စုံ 1957).

Political Challenges in the Early Independence Years

Because several key nationalist political leaders took an active interest in film production in the pre-World War II age, it is hardly a surprise that their enthusiasm carried over to the post-war independence period. However, with the assassination of General Aung San and members of his cabinet on the brink of independence, combined with the ethnic separatist movements already forming, and an armed Communist Party of Burma, prospects for a peaceful, united Union of Burma were looking dubious. Burma's newly independent government, rooted in anti-imperial politics, largely adopted a socialist rhetoric. Although Burma was the only former British colony to repudiate Commonwealth links at independence, it was still initially linked economically and militarily to Britain (Adeleke 2003). However, it was military and political change in Burma's biggest neighbour, China, which would call for even more diplomatic finesse, especially as commerce in the country was still largely in the hands of foreign capitalists.

Compounding previous threats to political integrity, as a direct result of Mao's victory in 1949, about 2000 Kuomintang (KMT) troops retreated across the Yunnanese border and into Shan State, in Burma's northeast. From there,

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the KMT, backed by Taiwan, later the CIA and the Thai government, began more systematically to build their forces, preparing for a counter-insurgency against the Maoists. Between 1950 and 1953, the number of Kuomintang troops in the Shan State swelled from 1700 to 12,000 (Ministry of Information 1953, p. i). The vast numbers of various anti-Yangon forces in the country caused quite a concern for the newly independent government (Callahan 1996, p. 414).

During these increasing challenges for national unity and integration in the country, the Burmese film industry continued to expand. Although correlation does not always suggest causation, the expansion of popular entertainment during periods of political crisis is worth considering. These military threats, political challenges and incursions could be seen both as a crisis of national identity and as a basis for which the national military forces could expand. Thinking about these as a political backdrop to the support for the growing national motion picture industry helps to animate not only what these films might have meant in their contemporary social milieu, but also the reasons behind the timing of certain narratives.

Ideology and Filmic Co-production in Burma

While the Burmese motion picture industry continued to expand in the 1950s, this did not preclude international collaborations. Perhaps the best-known war movie of the period is the 1954 British production The Purple Plain (Robert Parrish) starring Gregory Peck and Win Min Than, the wife of Burmese politician Thakin Aung Than. As far as period films specifically seeking to influence local political ideologies, the most significant of the surviving films is Ludu Aung Than (The People Win Through, George Seitz Jr, 1954), originally penned as a play by Prime Minister U Nu (ဦးနု 1955 [1950]), and also broadcast on Burmese radio in the early 1950s (Charney 2009, p. 340).

A former member of the Naga Ni book club, U Nu dedicates the play 'To Those Who Believe in Democracy.' U Nu's devout Buddhist stance placed religious morality as a way to solve the country's political problems. He even said, 'If we go to the root causes of the present disorders in this country, we will find that not less than 80 per cent of them are due to apathy to religion' (quoted in Von Der Mehden 1961, p. 170). For U Nu, one strategy to restore Buddhist devotion was to lessen the corrupting influences of capitalism and inequality; in other words, rather than taking a 'pull one's self up by one's bootstraps' approach to what he saw as a moral crisis, the problems

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stemmed from capitalist ideologies and experiences of inequalities. Only when social welfare was restored could people focus on their escape from the suffering of the endless cycle of rebirth (Sarkisyanz 1965, p. 171).

An affiliate of the US embassy in Rangoon also took an interest in the play and had it translated into English, an initiative that resulted in its later staging in California. Because of these adaptations the story would be spun to emphasize the dangers of communism (Charney 2010, p. 51). The Asia Foundation picked up on this development and sponsored a film version of the play; the total budget was the then-princely sum of $203,039, and the film was shot entirely in Burmese, although directed by American George Seitz Jr, starring Maung Maung Ta, who became a well-known Muslim actor who would later be an employee at the Burmese embassy in Washington, DC. The focus of the plot is on a young man who initially joins the Communist Party, but who is later horrified by some of their authoritarian practices, and ultimately decides that democracy is the best system for the people. The main figure representing the Communist Party in the movie is General Tauk Tun, portrayed as a bully.

The distribution plans for the film were principally aimed at Buddhist majority countries: Burma, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand. In Burma, it was first released at the Excelsior Cinema in Rangoon on 26 December 1953 (တက္ကသိုလ်ခင်မောင်ဇော် 2012, p. 67). While some reviews of the reception of the film suggest that some Burmese audiences liked it and saw it as one of the 'best films ever made in Burma,' other reports suggest that it flopped, or was downright insulting to some (Lee 2017, p. 117). In one account, angry viewers even torched the cinema (Charney 2010, p. 54).

The war drama mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Pearl Tears, directed by and starring Kyaw Swe, is an adaptation of the plot from the Ernest Hemingway novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; yet whereas the Hemingway novel is set during the Spanish Civil War and features a main character in the International Brigades of the Republican forces, the Burmese rendition depicts soldiers of the Tatmadaw battling against the Kuomintang enemy during the early 1950s.[15] The film was made in 1960, a particularly politically contentious time, as it was just at the end of the country's two-year initial rule by the military caretaker government.

Kyaw Swe is one of the industry's handsome action stars of the independence era. Originally named Maw Ni, in the late 1940s, Kyaw Swe was a student in a military school in Mandalay. He had been rubbing elbows

15 A Burmese film history book mentions that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was one of General Aung San's favourite novels (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 76).

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with some members of the film community but was first noticed by British Burma Film Company director U Ba Shin, who cast him to co-star in their feature Saw Ya San Sha (San Sha the Thief, U Ba Shin, 1946). It was here that U Ba Shin assigned him the stage name Kyaw Swe, and he was soon cast by Parrot Films director Pe Kyaing in the film Bokyoke (General, Pe Kyaing, 1946). By then, he had established himself as an action hero, and the A1 Film Company soon put him on the regular payroll. Following five successful films with A1, Kyaw Swe left to direct thirteen feature films on his own (တက္ကသိုလ်ခင်မောင်ဇော် 2012, pp. 62-63). Pearl Tears was one such film, produced by Kyaw Swe's own production company, Moe.

The plot centres on Seya Kyaw, the Captain of a platoon of Tatmadaw soldiers. Another platoon is led by General Myit Maung. They are located in the patchwork of territory in the Shan hills held by the Kuomintang armies. General Myit Maung's platoon enters a village recently abandoned by retreating KMT forces. They find many of the homes burned and discover a young woman in hiding. Her name is Ama (played by Khin Yu May, who not only co-starred with Kyaw Swe in several movies but also married him) and she tells of the horrors committed by the KMT to her village, the people needlessly abused and killed.

Ama joins with General Myint Maung's platoon, and later they meet with Seya Kyaw and his platoon. Seya Kyaw and Ama soon fall in love, at which point the narrative includes the ongoing romance between the two leads. The plot includes guerrilla warfare and skirmishing with the KMT enemy. For the close of the film, Seya Kyaw makes overtures that once the war is finished, he will return to Ama's village with her so that they might settle down together one day.

Whereas Pearl Tears is important in presenting a contemporary enemy of the state to 1960s Burmese audiences, historical fiction war films were powerful ideological tools as well. As such, because Burmese patriotic ideologies present the Tatmadaw as both having brought the country to independence, as well as its caretaker, World War II provides an ideal setting for dozens – if not hundreds – of military films produced in Burma.

Burmese Peasants and Japanese Soldiers

Based on the 1947 Maung Htin novel by the same name, the story of Nga Ba takes place during the Japanese occupation during World War II. Directed by U Chit Khin, and starring Nyunt Maung, May Nway and Bago May Myint, the

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film version of Nga Ba was produced by the British Burma Film Company.[16] Released in 1961, it is considered a film which promotes cross-ethnic unity (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 216) and is a socialist realist-style depiction of a simple Burmese peasant and his suffering as a result of Japanese imperialism. Its socialist theme resonated internationally. Because of this, the film was exported to both China and the USSR (တက္ကသိုလ်နေဝင်း 1973, p. 36). The fact that a film dealing with themes of Burmese patriotism would attract international audiences is noted as a point of national pride (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 257).

The protagonist of the film is a peasant farmer named Nga Ba (played by Nyunt Maung) whose life becomes indelibly transformed by the atrocities committed by the Japanese occupying forces. Nga Ba must contend with increasing economic hardship, being taken from his land to toil for the Japanese Army as forced labour, as well as traumatic incidents such as Japanese officials raping his sixteen-year-old daughter, soldiers beheading a Burmese independence fighter with a long sword, and Nga Ba's own arbitrary imprisonment and torture by the Japanese. As part of the movie's plot and eventual resolution of this imposition, there are strategic gestures made towards unifying the Myanmar and the Karen peoples (Maung Htin 1998 [1947], p. 122).

Given Burma's neutrality objectives by the end of the 1950s, we can see how Nga Ba exemplifies the country's careful balance of Buddhist ideology and nationalism within a cinematic style of Burmese socialist realism. Theravada Buddhist notions of material life as human suffering are repeatedly emphasized as a way to make sense of the atrocities and hardships instigated by the Japanese presence, and in one compelling scene, Nga Ba prays at the Shwedagon Pagoda, 'May I never be born again as a farmer; may I be born a capitalist.' However, as the plot progresses, we see Nga Ba increasingly disillusioned with capitalism and capitalists, and he later rescinds that prayer at the Shwedagon Pagoda. In this sense, we can see evidence of the plot using Theravada Buddhist concepts of both suffering (*tukka* or *doga* in Burmese) and cycles of rebirth (*samsara* or *thanthaya* in Burmese) to make sense of the changing conditions as a result of Japanese imperialism. We can see a pull away from capitalist dependency being legitimated by, and made sense of according to, a Buddhist logic.

In addition to the suffering of Nga Ba and his family as a result of the foreign occupation, there is a vignette which features the beheading of a Thakin (Burmese anti-colonial nationalist) with a Japanese samurai sword. Prior to receiving the fatal blow, the Thakin shouts '*Do Bama!*' or 'Our Burma!' In tandem with Burmese nationalism came the representation of cross-ethnic

16 This film company later changed its name to Nyunt Myanmar.

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unity as a strategy for wrestling the country from foreign imperialism; lest we forget, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) was an army largely united across national and ideological lines in order to defeat the Japanese, and would likely not have succeeded without the assistance of the Communist Party (a moot point in Ludu Aung Than). On the other hand, in the film Pearl Tears, we see a situation in which Burma's border integrity has been transgressed by a foreign enemy and local women require rescue and protection by the Tatmadaw, thus reaffirming the soldiers' masculinity. In Nga Ba, however, cross-ethnic unity becomes the means by which the international enemy will be defeated.

In these films, we are presented with a monolithically 'evil' enemy, although Burma's historical experience is much more complex. During the Japanese occupation in World War II, for example, some accounts show that the Japanese soldiers in Lawksawk, in the Shan State, generally treated the local villagers well (Adams 2000, p. 74). Chang (1999) has shown that while some Kuomintang troops had good relations with the local villagers and respected them, there were others who behaved like bandits and wreaked havoc on the Shan villages (Chang 1999, p. 31). The political situation was further complicated by the complex patchwork of other insurgent militias, such as the Karen, Kachin, Mon and Shan separatists as well as the Communist Party of Burma. The number of various militias in the Shan State alone, at one point, totalled more than 40. To address this kind of complexity in the space of a single feature film would be quite a feat. Screenplays aside, for the purposes of building national solidarity during a period in which the national military is expanding, representing such nuance on the silver screen might interfere with the ideological goals of the films' sponsors.

On the one hand, we can see during the first two decades of Burma's independence from Britain, that the national image crucially depended upon a notion of ethnic unity and pluralism; after all, the country was named the *Union* of Burma. On the other hand, ethnic chauvinism on the part of some Burman groups mean that members of non-Burman groups are not always given the same place at the table as their Burman counterparts. It would not be accurate to assert that the Cold War-era culture industries in Burma, including the motion picture industry, always put forward the idea that the people of Burma needed to unite across ethnic divisions. While films such as Pearl Tears and Nga Ba certainly do advocate national unity over ethnic factionalism, there are other Burmese Cold War era films which (arguably) contain blatant misrepresentation of ethnic minorities.

Shan historical monarchs, in particular, have been subjected to contentious representation both in the film Shwezayan (Shwezayan Temple, Khin

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Maung Nyunt, 1962) where an eleventh-century Shan princess is presented as a sorceress, SHAN PYI YAUK AYETHAY (Guests in Shanland, A1 Maung Chit, 1962), where a Burmese soldier falls in love with a Shan woman (Ferguson 2007, 2012), or the novels of Bo Ni, in which Shan monarchs are presented as tyrants (Elliott 2006, p. 250). Other representations of ethnic nationalities draw criticism for their perceived oversimplification of non-Burman cultures, or patronizing presentation of an unchanging, or even primitive, way of life in ethnic minority areas. Although certain examples of Burmese popular culture productions would explicitly strive for cross-class, cross-ethnic unity in their ideological message through positive representations of ethnic diversity *within* the union in the face of an international aggressor, we can see that this was not always the case; for some, it was the imperative to push for negative representations of powers which could potentially detract from national solidarity, namely the historical epistemological draw of the Shan rulers in the Shan State. In any case, the nation-building project, particularly in the Burmese context, is one which is ideologically fraught, and, as we have seen from the decades of on-going struggle, political suppression, and militarism, one which has not achieved the kind of unity or consent which its advocates sought.

Conclusion

In her book *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Mary Callahan details the history of the growth of the Tatmadaw into what has become 'the most durable incarnation of military rule in history' (Callahan 2003, p. 3). The expansion of Burma's military came through war: the Kuomintang incursion and the ongoing civil war brought to the fore problems and enemies which created the basis for the expansion of the military, as well as state-building. With the gathering power of the army and this ongoing war, one can examine the ways in which the country's popular culture industries might have connected audiences with these political issues, the extent to which films might have ideologically aligned themselves with the army's political projects.

In discussing popular discourse within the country, it is important not to underestimate the ways in which the culture industries, and films such as PEARL TEARS and NGA BA effectively communicated these ideas to the broader population. As we can see from the examination of Burma's motion picture industry, from the early days of independence through the early years of the country's parliamentary democracy, Burmese nationalists have

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consistently shown interest in, and enthusiasm for, the mimetic powers of the silver screen. It is through these channels that we can see the recurring thematic pattern that the Burmese nation depends on a strong army as a liberating force from an outside enemy, and from the independence years, an increasing notion of cross-ethnic solidarity, whether real or imagined. Although the political behaviour of people in Burma has repeatedly and defiantly demonstrated that it is not directly shaped by the ideas promoted by the government media or propaganda, examination of films such as Pearl Tears and Nga Ba can reveal important ideological underpinnings to a growing nationalist project at a critical juncture in Burmese history.

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4 Gender, Nation and Spatial Mobility in On Top of the Wave, on Top of the Wind*

Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen

Abstract

This chapter examines women's mobility as presented in Vietnamese revolutionary cinema in its heyday following the Gulf of Tonkin incident (in 1964). Focusing on Ngọc Quỳnh's On Top of the Wave, on Top of the Wind, it argues that this film offers a timely reflection upon the reality of fighting and the labour of the Vietnamese people in the American War. Through the film's spatial narrative and visuality of cultural and physical geography, the filmmaker conflates nation and home, blurring the separation of domestic and public spaces and creating a national/familial space for both sexes. Yet while this narrative invokes patriotism and mobilizes women's participation in the national struggle, it also limits women's agency and subjectivity after the war.

Keywords: Vietnamese war documentaries, women and war, spatial mobility, gender and nation, and socialist cinema

On 2 August 1964, President Johnson reported that the North Vietnamese attacked US boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, triggering expanded US involvement in the Vietnam War. To punish the Việt Minh and curtail the increasing reputation of revolutionary forces in the South, President Johnson quickly launched a siege named Operation Rolling Thunder, which stretched from

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early 1965 to late 1968. This incursion, unlike most previous sieges, took advantage of high-tech US Air Force equipment to devastatingly drop bombs throughout the North. In response, Hồ Chí Minh publicly called for the whole country to rise up against US imperialism in 1966. Echoing the national struggle against the US Army, documentaries and newsreels were produced to mobilize the people for the 'sacred resistance against Americans in Vietnam' (*Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ thần thánh*). Engaging with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Ngọc Quỳnh's ĐẦU SÓNG NGỌN GIÓ (ON TOP OF THE WAVE, ON TOP OF THE WIND, 1967) weaves together a story about an island (in an unidentified location in North Vietnam) and its role against the US forces with a theme of women's changing roles. The film documents the process of women's transformation cinematically portrayed as a journey of women leaving private spaces for entry into the public realm.

This chapter examines women's mobility as presented in revolutionary cinema in its heyday following the Gulf of Tonkin incident. It closely investigates the dynamics and parallelism of the representations of gender mobility and spatial transformation portrayed in ĐẦU SÓNG NGỌN GIÓ (henceforth referred to as THE WAVE), a representative documentary film of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema. It argues that through deploying documentary modes, this film offers a timely reflection upon the reality of fighting and the labouring of the Vietnamese people in the American War. Despite being a propagandistic film, the filmmaker effectively conflates the notion of nation with that of the home, blurring the separation of domestic and public spaces and creating a national/familial space for both sexes through the film's spatial narrative and spectacular visuality of cultural and physical geography. Yet while this narrative invokes consciousness of patriotism and accordingly mobilizes women's participation in the national revolution, it also serves to limit women's agency and subjectivity after the war ended.

There have been only a few studies that take Vietnamese revolutionary films and documentaries as their central focus. The late entry of Vietnam into the film world outside the Soviet and socialist countries partly explains this lack of research. Only one year prior to the Reformation, the economic reform (Đổi Mới) film directed by Đặng Nhật Minh, BAO GIỜ CHO ĐẾN THÁNG MƯỜI (When the Tenth Month Comes, 1984) was shown at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 1985, marking the first Vietnamese feature screened at a US film festival (Charlot 1989, p. 442). Recently, some researchers have turned their attention to Vietnamese contemporary cinema (Charlot 1989, 1991; Marchetti 1991), guerrilla documentary (Wilson 2017; Win 2017) and post-socialist documentary (Wilson 2015). Although these

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writers provide historical insights and pay attention to the filmmaking process, they do not regard gender as a crucial element of North Vietnamese cinema. A lone exception is Marchetti's article. Resonating with Marchetti's focus on gender but considering Vietnamese wartime films, Lan Duong (2014) compares gender representations in films made in North and South Vietnam during this period, arguing that the correlations between gender and landscape play as 'affective sites' where sadness, fear and love are put on stage. Going beyond viewing national geography as 'an expressive tool to aestheticize sentiment about the nation' (Duong 2014, p. 262), I want to question the ways in which socialist filmmakers visually made sense of the nation for women and portrayed the process of women accessing public space while contributing to national resistance and nation-building. The Wave consistently portrays the nation as home, which in turn makes its defence the proper concern of women as defenders of 'the domestic.' At the same time, the film blurs the division of public and private space as seen in the Western model.

The Wave brought Ngọc Quỳnh his first Golden Prize at the Fifth Moscow Film Festival (Hoàng Thanh et al 2003, p. 106). Born in 1932, Ngọc Quỳnh first served on the self-defence volunteer team in his hometown of Thanh Hóa. He then worked as a photo-journalist and a newsreel cameraman before starting his filmmaking career in the late 1950s. During the early stage of his career, Ngọc Quỳnh usually co-directed with other filmmakers. For example, he collaborated with Trần Đức Hóa and Nguyễn Thụ in Chống Hạn (Fighting Drought, 1957) and Diệt Dốt (Killing Stupidity, 1958), respectively. Beside The Wave, another Ngọc Quỳnh documentary, Lũy Thép Vĩnh Linh (Vĩnh Linh Steel Rampart, 1971), also went on to win the Golden Prize at the Seventh Moscow Film Festival (Nguyễn 1974b, p. 258). Stylistically, Ngọc Quỳnh developed his filmmaking signature by using poetic images in these two films. Thematically, his documentaries are in tune with a revolutionary cinema that reflects socialism building, the heroic struggle of the people and the brutality of war.

The Northern state-sponsored cinema, especially documentaries, played a significant role in the war effort against the US Army and South Vietnam. With the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, Vietnam was divided into two parts. In 1953, Hồ Chí Minh signed Decree No. 147/SL to establish the state-owned Vietnam Movie and Photography Enterprise to make cinema an effective propaganda institution for the state and party. It wasn't until 1959 that the first feature film appeared – Chung Một Dòng Sông (Along the Same River, Nguyễn Hồng Nghi and Phạm Hiếu Dân) – but long before that the first guerrilla documentary, Trận Mộc Hóa (Battle of the Mộc Hóa,

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Mai Lộc, 1948), was produced. From that point on, newsreels and documentaries were constantly produced, outnumbering feature films, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s.

In Vietnamese documentaries produced during the American War, women occupy a central position. Unlike Indonesian war films produced during the New Order era (1966-1998), which marginalize women as Budi Irawanto argues (this volume, Chapter 5), women's heroism, patriotism and especially their military skills (such as using high-tech weapons like rifles and artillery) become an iconic spectacle in Vietnamese war documentaries. Du Kích Củ Chi (The Củ Chi Guerrillas, Trần Nhu, 1967), Một Ngày Trực Chiến (A Day on Duty, Phan Trọng Quỳ and Nhất Hiên, 1968) and Những cô gái Ngư Thủy (The Girls of Ngư Thủy, Lò Văn Minh, 1969) are among many documentaries centring on collective female heroism and military capabilities in the war against the United States. Their fighting is even visually depicted as militaristic performance, which renders war as a site for women's assertion of their military potential. Adopting this same theme and propagandist ideology with a recognizable poetic style, The Wave pays less attention to highlighting women's military capabilities and more to visually documenting the process of women leaving private spaces for entry into the public realm.

Theories of Space, Vietnamese Women and Spatial Mobility

The public/private division has been at the centre of discussions around women's roles in society (Weintraub 1997, p. 1).[1] Regarding the separation of spaces, most typical and most related to the politics of spaces is Hannah Arendt's public/private realm in her book *The Human Condition* (1958) and Jürgen Habermas's private/public sphere first published in *The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere* (1991 [1962]). Both Arendt's and Habermas's notions of the dichotomy between public and private emphasize citizen visibility and voice in the public (political) sphere. Habermas pays more attention to the relationships between gender and spaces in which men are associated with the public sphere, and women are usually tied to the private space, which connotes women's invisibility and domestic constraints.

The public/private divide implies an operation of power structure embedded into the relationship between gender and space. Feminists have

1 Weintraub (1997, p. 7) elaborates different perspectives on this pair and classifies four main ways that the public/private distinctions are discussed in the present analysis in social and political studies.

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challenged the inherent patriarchy in this spatial relation, pointing out that the construction of space implies a system of gender regulation (Spain 1993; Massey 1994). For example, adopting Henri Lefebvre's analysis of gender and the transformations of space in an economic system, Massey argues that 'the hegemonic spaces and places which we face today are not only products of forms of economic organization but reflect back at us also – and in the process reinforce – other characteristics of social relations, among them those of gender' (1994, p. 183). That said, the relation of gender and space has a history, and feminist geography has aimed at either breaking down or challenging this historically naturalized dichotomy between spaces.

In traditional Vietnamese society, the distinction of private and public spaces does not fit completely into the Western model (Drummond 2000),[2] but gender issues and spatiality are at the centre of both societies. Using The Wave as a case study to closely look at spatial relations and women's social position in Vietnam, I am adopting French philosopher-sociologist Henri Lefebvre's definition of spaces – that '(social) space is [a social] product' – particularly its 'fundamental premise of the socio-spatial dialectic' (quoted in Soja 1989, p. 81). I want to consider how spatial relations changed in Vietnamese society during the war. I am adopting Lefebvre's notion of the social space in a loose sense. Lefebvre's main concern is about the urban sector and the organization of space within it. I also adopt his insights about the 'dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent' connection between society and space (Soja 1989, p. 81). As shown in the following film analysis, women's spatial mobility goes hand in hand with the social roles that they were expected to take on. As a form of art, The Wave offers a 'representation of space,' one of the aspects of the interaction triad that Lefebvre suggested besides spatial practice (lived space) and representational space (space imagined by engineers and architectures) that helped shape the party's discourse on national space as a unified space regardless of the geographical distance of the island. This discourse on space generates women's mobility within the boundaries of the national space in the war context. Nevertheless, being dependent on the national space, women's spatial flexibilities accordingly were contingent on the historical framework that worked to limit women's socio-economic development after the war.

2 Drummond argues that in Vietnamese society – from the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods – private space linked to domestic space is similar to the Western ideal in which patriarchal authority dominates the home. However, according to Drummond, regarding the public, 'there is little evidence of a tradition of a public sphere at all – nor of public spaces' in the Western sense (2000, p. 2380).

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Gender, War and Spatial Mobility

As noted in historiographic writings about Vietnamese society, one of the most obvious changes in colonial Vietnam from the 1920s onwards was women's increasing entry into the public space. Women as 'a social group with particular interests, grievances, and demands' (Marr 1981, p. 191) joined women's organizations, participating in educational programmes such as the Eastern Capital Non-Tuition School Movement (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục) led by Phan Bội Châu. Moreover, women's voices became increasingly recognizable in print media. Newspapers owned by female intellectuals such as *Woman Bell* (*Nữ giới chung*, launched in 1918, with Sương Nguyệt Ánh as the main editor) and *Women's Review* (*Phụ nữ tùng san*, 1929, with Trần Thị Như Mẫn as the editor)[3] were widely circulated in colonial urban Vietnam. Fighting for women's equality and directly challenging outdated patriarchy, these newspapers generated a new perception of womanhood which placed individual freedom at its centre as opposed to the traditional view of women's obligations, including the 'three submissions' (*tam tòng*) and 'four virtues' (*tứ đức*). However, those rights and possibilities to access public spaces were available and accessible to only a small circle of upper- and middle-class women in big cities such as Hanoi, Saigon and other cities where urban cultures and capital resources allowed for the emergence of individual consciousness in colonial Vietnam.[4] For most of the female populace in the countryside, women's rights were still either an abstract or strange concept.

Recognizing rural women's invisibility, the Lao Động Party (its precedent was the Indochinese Communist Party, Đông Dương Cộng Sản Đảng) took gender equality as its duty, opening the gates of political space for more women in the countryside. One year after the Hồ Chí Minh government declared national independence in 1945, women could vote for the first time to choose representatives for their government, and ten women were sent to the new Chamber of Deputies (Turner-Gottschang and Phan 1998, p. xiv). In the same year, the Northern Constitution announced that 'Women enjoy full and equal rights with men under the constitution in every respect' (Fall 1957, p. 157, quoted in Turley 1972, p. 798). As the nation entered the war against the United States, the strategy of promoting women's rights as

3 On the emergence of Vietnamese colonial print media and gender, see McHale (1995).

4 For a detailed discussion on urban cultures, especially the social organizations in colonial Vietnam, see Woodside (1971). Discussion on the interactions between 'the city and the people' can be found in Peycam (2013), which focuses on Saigon, the centre of Vietnamese colonial cities.

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'essential weapons' (Marr 1981, p. 192) was put to the test. After over nine years of anti-French resistance (1946-1954), women were needed to fight the war due to the inadequate number of men. In the context of Vietnam, insofar as the recognition of women was emphasized by the appearance of urban elite women in print media, wartime resistance offered women public visibility. In this way, within the doctrine of the party, women involved with war would enjoy their full rights as democratic citizens (Turley 1972).

As more attention was paid to women's contributions in the realm of military and politics, women also actively participated and assumed various roles in revolutionary cinema. Besides female film stars emerging from socialist films, such as Phi Nga, Trà Giang, Đức Hoàn, Tuệ Minh and others, women also occupied diverse positions behind the scenes in revolutionary cinema. No existing research examines the topic of women working behind the scenes in Vietnam, and the brief information about them can be found in books introducing artists. For example, the *Summary Record of the Members of the Vietnamese Association of Cinema* (Trần 2000), with short biographies of the artists and filmmakers, records approximately 20 women who served as make-up artists, editors, camerawomen, sound recordists and film directors. The recordist for The Wave was a woman, Lê Thanh Ngà. Some women received high-level training and were promoted in their professional arenas. While women's evolvement in film production was not as visible as men's, a brief record of their positions sheds light on women's capabilities in traditionally male realms like cinema as well as on the party's effort in encouraging gender equality in all fields, at least in its initial commitment. Further research on this topic is needed to provide nuance about women's contributions not only in production but in distribution and exhibition, two fields that offered many chances for women's participation in rural areas.

The Nation as a Mythicized Space and Memory in The Wave

Ngọc Quỳnh's The Wave (1967) is the story of a village on a remote island amidst an attack by the United States, while all the villagers are struggling against the harsh weather and labouring for survival. Despite being considered a classic documentary of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, the film does not conform to strict principles of the genre. Instead, The Wave distinguishes itself from the large body of Vietnamese documentaries because of its spatial abstractness and metaphoricity. The film title (On Top of the Wave, on Top of the Wind) is a common expression of being in

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a precarious place. The title here has a double meaning as a non-locating metaphor: first, the village might be any village in Vietnam, and second, the village is a symbol of Vietnam, a socialist country on the front against American imperialism.

Many documentaries about role models and battles by the North prioritize the specificities of place. This is clearly revealed in such titles as Mười Cô Gái Núi Nài (Ten Girls of Nài Mountain, Trần Bảo, 1964), Bên Bờ Bến Hải (Bến Hải Riverside, Phạm Hanh, 1967) and Trận Địa Bên Sống Cấm (River Cấm Battlefield, Nguyễn Kha and Trần Anh Trà, 1966). Being assigned to make a documentary about fighting on an island by the Studio of Documentary, Ngọc Quỳnh decided not to choose specific locations as in Hòn Mê (Hòn Mê Island, Pham Thanh, 1968), a documentary about the same subject. Instead, his film is about the struggle of the people on an anonymous island after spending nine months moving from island to island. The lack of the name of the island(s) parallels the anonymity of the heroic individuals who stand for the nation and merge into the collective (Nguyễn 1974b, p. 268). The lack of this spatial specificity and personal identity of the first-person narrator helps expand 'the film's capability of generalization' (Hoàng Thanh et al. 2003, p. 104). By using voice-over with the direct-address style of the Griersonian tradition, The Wave adopts an expository mode (Nichols 2001, pp. 99-138), presenting the strength of the island in the war against the US Army.

The film starts with a long shot, panning across the landscape of a small island. The island is framed at the centre surrounded by the sea and sky, which cut across each other on the horizon. Alongside these images, an unidentified male narrator introduces his island:

> My homeland is a normal small island located in a group of islands of the northern gulf. According to an old myth, the island used to be a mountainous area. One day, the water rose up as if covering everything in the deep sea. But spiritual mountains still rise up facing winds and waves from four directions. I love my hometown; I am proud of this small island. [...] I love swamps, hot sand hills, dried pebble hills because this is my hometown where I was born and have grown up.

The black-and-white images of mountains, sky and sea references not only mythic space and time but also Vietnamese origin myths in ancient times. Historian Patricia Pelley (2002, p. 6) insightfully demonstrates how Vietnamese officials constructed the nation's postcolonial histories which were based on a certain 'fictive dimension' to create a sense of national essence. By revitalizing mythicized memories of a prehistoric story and suppressing

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historical facts, Vietnamese communist historians invoke a national spirit of resistance against foreign aggression and of unity (Pelley 2002, p. 143).

Following this line of thought, Ngọc Quỳnh creates a space that visually evokes shared memories and the imagination of the nation's roots from the mythicized memory of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, whose mainstream narratives consider the nation's great legendary father and mother, respectively.[5] Nationalist ideology draws on legendary times to promulgate national solidarity by suggesting that Vietnamese people from the mountains to the sea are all brothers and sisters of one family (*anh em một nhà*). This sense of family, hinted through mythic imagery, helped blur gender distinctions, enacting the equal responsibilities of both sexes in defending the nation.[6]

Not merely representing the cultural symbolism of the nation, the filmmaker underlines the physical geography of the island as a unified entity. In this regard, the film illustrates what Pelley observes: 'Because the idea of national essence was topographically expressed, it was linked to landscape and space' (2002, p. 145). The opening sequence, with long shots panning the imagery of the whole island, demarcates a physical and bodily entity. As the narrative progresses, the filmmaker aims to underline the linkage between the island and the rest of other parts of the nation as a 'blood attachment of a remote place on the far sea to the motherland' (Hoàng Thanh et al. 2003, p. 105).

Following the opening sequence is a vocal introduction of the 'new life' on the island since the government established socialism in the North. Since then, the narrator proudly states, his island often receives support from the mainland and develops its economy that helps shape a stable life for everyone. The linkage of the mainland and island refers to a spatial implication in two senses. First, it implies the present division of the nation and the military attacks by the United States which is causing national

5 According to the legend, Âu Cơ gave birth to a hundred eggs in a pouch which later grew up to be a hundred children. After that, they separated the children in half: 50 children followed Âu Cơ to the mountainous areas and 50 children followed Lac Long Quân to the sea. The eldest son of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ later became Hùng King of the Văn Lang Kingdom, the ancient country of Vietnam.

6 It should be noted that the word for 'nation' in Vietnamese means 'land and water.' A synonym of nation is '*giang sơn*,' meaning 'river and mountain,' and has been widely used in literature. In a very simple sense, the Vietnamese define the nation as land and water (in a sharper sense, river). To explain the concept of the nation during wartime, nationalist works seized this naturalistic interpretation to make it clear and relevant to the audiences, most of them illiterate peasants. The poetic and metaphoric definition of 'nation' can also be found in Nguyễn Khoa Điềm's famous excerpt 'Nation' from *Mặt đường khát vọng* (Aspirational Road, 1974a).

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separation. Second, the emphasis on the economic development of the island, thanks to the government, underlines the socialist success in its management of decentralizing urban spaces and expanding territories.

In a more explicit scene underlining the bodily bonds of the nation, we see images of a female teacher surrounded by children outdoors. Close-ups reveal innocent and excited children's faces looking at the teacher. We then hear the male voice-over merging into and becoming the voice of the female teacher, saying, 'Today the teacher will lecture about the nation. The nation is our island; it is the hundreds of neighbourhood islands surrounding us; it is the hazy green land in [our] heart. The nation is the Hương River, the Tháp Mười rice fields and Điện Biên Phủ and is where Uncle Hồ [Bác Hồ] belongs.' This vocal definition of the nation is accompanied by a lower sound of orchestra music. This hierarchy of sound fills the political definition of nation with an affective dimension. By listing famous scenic sites and historical places from north to south, the explanation stresses the varied and united geographical body of the nation. Uncle Hồ as the father of the nation is mentioned as an embodiment of the familial bond, despite the geographical partition of North and South Vietnam at the time. In this regard, the perception of the nation-state as a political entity is repressed while a sense of the nation-family emerges. This gesture also serves to turn the public into a domestic space and meld the two arenas that are usually separate.

Spatial Transformation and the Shift of Women's Roles during the Revolution

The beginning of the documentary introduces the mythical space of the island and quickly moves to the present daily life of the people. The treatment of the space of everyday activities conforms to the normative constructions of gender spaces that I discussed earlier in the paper. The first series of scenes on the sea shows images of men working. The narrator, shifting from first-person to second-person voice-over, asserts that 'The sea is not mysterious for us. The sea is like a seafood farm.' This explicit commentary is visually illustrated by a series of images displaying a group of young males collecting seafood products, bringing them to a boat. Another group is rowing the boat. The camera then selectively focuses on a male from varied angles. In one scene, a long shot focuses on a young man boating in the sea and then cuts to a close-up of his muscled body with tanned skin. His body is inscribed into the sky – the background – filmed from a low

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angle, embodying human power. These ordinary people are determined to transform nature, and images of their working bodies are spectacularized, commensurate with socialist aesthetics.

Regarding its take on socialist aesthetics, The Wave, to a lesser extent, reflects a common feature of both socialist aesthetics and fascist aesthetics in capturing movements of human bodies (Sontag 1981, p. 91). In her well-known essay on filmmaker and actress Leni Riefenstahl, Susan Sontag observes that while both fascist and official socialist works are in favour of 'a choreographed display of bodies' they differ from each other in their notion of displayed bodies. Fascist visual art fetishizes idealism manifested through its promotion of physical perfection (Sontag 1981, p. 92). Socialist art, as illustrated above, prefers 'a utopian morality' to the 'utopian aesthetics' (Sontag 1981, p. 92) that fascist visual art upholds. The cinematic portrayal of the young fisherman's half-naked body in The Wave in this case speaks to the human will in its journey of conquering nature rather than an exhibition of bodily beauty.[7]

The camera then shifts to a series of images and pans showing the landscape of the island accompanying a visual introduction of a gendered form of labour. The sequence on the islands starts with a long shot of a female collective carrying big pots of presumably salted fish on both sides of their shoulders. A medium shot then shows a woman using a pole to stir salted fish in the big pots. The scene then cuts to images of women drying sea products under the sunshine and making fish sauce at home. Another cut shows a woman raking rice in a courtyard and two children playing nearby. Although the labour of both men and women are emphasized equally, the role of men and women are divided clearly. Men go out to sea to fish, an active and mobile space; women stay on land, a passive and immobile space. While also gendered as feminine, as in the common phrase 'Mother Sea,' the sea often signifies a workspace for males in Vietnamese traditional societies. This presentation of gender roles reflects the traditional configuration of the relationship between gender and workspace.

The peaceful scene of daily life of the island people is interrupted by the noise of the US bombing squad. The arrival of war to the island results in a collapse of the gendered division of labour as depicted at the very beginning. This shift from a peaceful life to a suddenly threatened life is exhibited through a juxtaposition between poetic images and violent ones. At first, the film displays a series of images of two girls in white shirts running along the seaside. A high angle shot shows their movement next to the calm

7 I thank Gaik Cheng Khoo for referring me to Susan Sontag's essay.

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waves beating against the sand. Mild background music is mixed with this picture of humans and nature. The girls' white shirts are in harmony with the white waves under their feet, signifying the harmony of people and the landscape. Rather than quickly introducing the US air attack when the village community is labouring, the film lingers on this series of images filled with visual delight and peaceful scored music.

This style of editing refers to the avant-garde tradition of Soviet montage, evoking an emotional effect through such juxtaposition. Although socialist realism as a methodology requires filmmakers to emphasize the narrative development of its characters under the leadership of the party, some Vietnamese filmmakers like Ngọc Quỳnh still deployed an artistic representation of war that was usually deemed a bourgeois expression during this period. Later in The Wave, Ngọc Quỳnh departs from the socialist realistic conventions of depicting reality. In the scene of many boats gathering on the sea at night, Ngọc Quỳnh exercises creative liberties in displaying hundreds of lights on the boats in the sea. This staged image contrasts with the war reality when lights must be turned off to avoid attracting US airplanes at night. For a moment, the film ignores such logic of reality while prioritizing visual pleasures.

The film then uses voice-over to shift its attention without interrupting the narrative flow. We hear a warning from the narrator: 'Be careful, the enemy's airplane.' Soon after the sound of airplanes, we see the immediate transformation of women's roles. The following scenes record brave female guerrillas who fight side by side with the men at the forefront. Women also help the elderly and children hide underground from the bombs. They sail along the river to transport weapons and transfer soldiers. The filmic narrative portrays the transformation of women's role as natural, without any further verbal explanation needed to elaborate for the audience. The images tell enough: because of the war, a domestic woman becomes a spiritual warrior.

The transformation of women's roles in the present film reverberates with the government's well-known dictum of the 'three responsibilities' for women that was issued in 1965, two years before the film was made. The 'three responsibilities' include: 1) assume the labour of production, to replace men and free them for combat; 2) assume control of the family and encourage husbands and sons to enlist; 3) participate in combat when necessary.[8] The year after this policy was launched saw a widespread movement of women joining volunteer forces for national liberation across the nation. Still, women

8 I am using Turley's translation (1972, p. 800).

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in rural areas were expected to assume a fighter role while not abandoning their role as labourers for the sake of the national struggle.

The dynamic roles of women in the collective workspace are mirrored in The Wave. It needs to be emphasized that the portrayal of collective labour depicted in the latter part of the film differentiates itself from that of the opening. Unlike the scenes in the beginning of the film that present women in charge of domestic labour, labouring in the midst of US bombing, later on women are shown working with men to prevent a drought. Amid the drone of enemy planes, the camera films rows of legs walking up and down the mountains towards the spring to get water. We only see the image of 'the people' as a collective without a gendered division of labour. The film illustrates the socialist aesthetic of glorifying the collective character of 'the people' as the main source of the nation's historical decisive changes. In this regard, women enter an orthodox paradigm where they escape the patriarchal division of private/public space and soon face a national space which is imagined as a space of agency.

The collapse of gendered division not only occurs in the labour and battle arenas but also in the dynamics of gender relations and gender relations to space. Near the end of the film, Ngọc Quỳnh creates a parallelism in his visualization of images. The heroic image of women as a symbol of the nation is used to highlight revolutionary spirit and a gendered national liberation. In the labour scenes at sea, the images of muscled fishermen are carefully represented; in the fighting scenes also at sea, the images of spiritual women are the focus. A wide shot shows a young woman with a gun on her shoulder standing among other male warriors sitting on a boat. The woman is looking at an airplane in the sky to identify the direction for the male soldiers to shoot down the airplane. To see the target clearer, she quickly climbs along the mast. A close up shows her focused and calm face. A cut to a low-angled medium shot presents her body stretching along the mast and the sail and standing out against the blank background of the sky and white colour. This visual portrayal of the woman makes her look like a stone statue. The image of the young woman parallels that of the man in the scene of the collective labour at the scene; both are filmed in a glamorous sense, inspiring an emotional appeal.

Conclusion: Gender and Space in Post-war Documentary

The film ends with images of a group of male and female militia standing next to the seaside at dawn. The villagers are excited to bring home fish

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and the wreckage of hunted-down airplanes alike. The boats sail out to the sea as if the enemy's attack did not stop their normal lives: 'We still go fishing. Vietnam's fishermen believe in their strength, in the power of the great "green land" in their hearts.' This statement follows after a scene of the dark, poetic imagery exhibiting hundreds of lights on the boats in the sea. Amidst such calm scenes, which rarely occurred during the scene of the brutal US bombing, the diegetic sound of the recorded voice of Uncle Hồ calling for resistance against the United States rises in the air. The way that Hồ Chí Minh's voice is woven into the scenery of the island's immensity with a mythic sense of space creates a new sense of space – the space of a unified nation. Re-envisioning folklore about the nation, the film conveys a nationalistic message about the responsibility of Vietnamese citizens to protect their ancestral land. The filmic visual representations of the space serve to reconfigure gender meaning and women's roles in a way that parallels the changing spaces of the island. Accordingly, the film challenges the distinction of the hegemonic binary of private and public space. Moreover, the filmmaker makes use of war to explain women's spatial shifts. Being offered the legal position of citizens, women became both political agents and were also manipulated by the nationalist discourse that imposed protector roles for women in the war years.

The state's heroic narrative of war, however, faced a critique in revisionist films in the post-war era. The revisionist tendency was part of a large movement in film and literature amidst transitional moments of history, economy and culture.[9] Because of the failure of the subsidy economy, Vietnam passed a policy of reform, adopting a market economy at the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986. With this economic shift, the government also loosened its control over the arts, including cinema. Trần Văn Thủy's 1987 documentary Chuyện tử tế (Story of Kindness), one of the most well-known revisionist cinematic works, was publicly released right after this historical turn and represented a critical voice towards political and social discourses through consciously self-reflexive filmmaking about the theme of spirituality in the country.[10]

Echoing Trần's self-reflexive style, but foregrounding gender issues, Trần Mạnh Thích's Trở lại Ngư Thủy (Return to Ngư Thủy, 1998) questions women's heroism and sacrifice for the nation in wartime. The film is inspired by the 1969 documentary, Những cô gái Ngư Thủy (The Girls of Ngư Thủy, Lò Minh), which showcases the collective heroism of a female

9 For detailed discussion on revisionist cinema, see Bradley (2001).

10 See Wilson (2015).

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artillery guerrilla unit in Ngư Thủy, a village near the seaside in Quảng Bình, a province next to the seventeenth parallel known as the 'land of fire' during the war years. Trở lại Ngư Thủy features the harsh life of the heroic fighters 30 years after the release of the original film which praised their significant contribution to national liberation. Besides the subjective voice of the assumed filmmaker, the film records individual voices of female veterans, revealing their financial difficulties, physical weakness and loneliness (some of them did not find a husband after the war ended, though they were still proud of their contribution to the revolutionary cause). Juxtaposing the footage of heroic women on the war front as portrayed in Những cô gái Ngư Thủy with that of the poor and aged women in the present, the film suggests the failure of the socialist promise to heroines who devoted their youth and risked their lives for the national cause in wartime. Unlike the mobility that women acquired by entering into the national space to work and fight for the nation like men, the Ngư Thủy women 30 years later are stuck in poverty and marginalized in the process of the nation's modernization. Trở lại Ngư Thủy, read along with The Wave and other revolutionary films about heroism in wartime, generates a more complex view about discourse on gender and space and gestures to women's spatial contingency.

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5 Spectacularity of Nationalism

War, Propaganda and Military in Indonesian Cinema during the New Order Era

Budi Irawanto

Abstract
This article explores the intricate interlinks between war, propaganda, military and cinema in the context of the Indonesian New Order militaristic regime (1966-1998) characterized by the military intervention in civilian affairs. The New Order war films not only carved out a heroic image of the Indonesian military, it also created a spectacle for a strong nationalistic sentiment regarding the military in comparison to civilians and politicians. Through the narrative modality and visual depiction of armed struggles for independence, many war films embodied an abstract idea of nationalism. While the depiction of armed struggles for independence in such a dramatic way is accorded to the spectacular nature of film, it also substantially renders the civilian struggles for independence through political negotiations (*perundingan*) insignificant.

Keywords: war film, armed struggle, military, propaganda, nationalism, New Order

Introduction

The early development of cinema during the post-independence era in Southeast Asia is commonly marked by the cinematic depiction of armed struggles against the colonialist regime. Cinema has generally been used strategically 'to enforce the myth of the unitary nation and to interpellate the textual subject as willing members of the nation' (Dissanayake 1994, p. xvi). In particular, the framing of World War II tends to be from a national perspective since each nation tells its own stories through its films (Chapman

Khoo, Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (eds), *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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2008). Indonesian cinema was no exception. The 'Father of Indonesian Cinema,' Usmar Ismail, established the first wholly owned Indonesian film company in 1950, a year after Indonesia gained its independence (*merdeka*) and directed pioneering films depicting the real lives of Indonesians and their struggle for independence. Usmar's first film, Darah dan Doa (The Long March, 1950) can be understood as part of such a movement in the post-independence era, paving the way for subsequent war film productions in Indonesia.

After the political turmoil in the late 1960s, Indonesian cinema gradually revived with some popular genres such as drama, action and horror (locally called '*mistik*'). There were at least 1640 films produced during the heyday of the New Order regime.[1] Although the number of war films was less than 2 per cent (25 films) of the total films produced during the New Order era, they played a crucial role in constructing the nation visually and narratively through the circulation and exhibition of state-sponsored films. Circulating through commercial film theatres, the government made watching some war films compulsory for students across Indonesia and part of the dissemination process of official history meant to legitimate the establishment of the New Order militaristic regime.

Focusing on the anti-colonial resistance against Dutch colonial rule (1800-1949) as well as Japanese occupation (1942-1945), most Indonesian films portraying war-related themes were made during the New Order regime (1966-1998) – thus, playing a pivotal role in shaping the definition of nationalism and what it is to be a nation and nationalist. This is understandable given cinema can be understood as a very powerful cultural practice and institution both in reflecting and intervening in the discourses of national identity. Furthermore, war cinema is typically associated with the birth of 'national cinema,' which is embedded with national myth-making or ideological production in order to construct nationhood (Dissanayake 1994). Rewording Benedict Anderson's (1991) idea on the formation of nationalism, 'image-capitalism' (commercial films) makes it possible for people to think about themselves and relate to others in profoundly new ways.

In this chapter, the intricate interlinks among war, propaganda, military and cinema in the context of the Indonesian New Order militaristic regime

1 Based on my calculation of information in Kristanto's *Katalog Film Indonesia* (Indonesian Film Catalogue, 2005), there are 25 war films (6.6%) out of a total production of 1640 films during the heyday of the New Order regime (1971-1997). Most of the war films were set during the Dutch colonial era and the Japanese occupation (before 1945), while only five war films were set after the 1945 Proclamation of Indonesian Independence.

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are explored. War films[2] (commonly known as *film perjuangan*) with strong propagandistic elements were mostly sponsored by the State Film Production Centre (Pusat Produksi Film Negara, PPFN) and the Provincial Military Command (Komando Daerah Militer). They not only carved out a heroic image of the military in Indonesia, but, most importantly, they also created spectacles for a strong nationalistic sentiment of the army (military) in contrast to civilians and politicians. Through the visual depiction of armed struggles for independence, many war films embody an abstract idea of nationalism. While the depiction of armed struggles for independence in such dramatic ways are accorded to the spectacular nature of film, it also renders the civilian struggles for independence through political negotiations (*perundingan*) insignificant.

'National' Cinema History and War Films

The history of Indonesian 'national' cinema is entangled with a nationalistic-oriented attempt to erase any 'foreign' influences (elements) in the trajectory of Indonesian films. This attempt would presumably create a 'pure' national cinema, which is wholly produced by (indigenous) Indonesians and that narrates issues relevant within Indonesian society. Unsurprisingly, a predominant number of writings on the history of Indonesian cinema (Said 1991a; Taufik Abdullah 1993; Misbach Yusa Biran 2009) did not deem some films produced by European (Eurasian) as well as by ethnic Chinese producers prior to independence (1920s-1950s) as *film nasional* (national cinema). Furthermore, as an extension beyond the cultural form of Indonesian independence, *film nasional* 'is placed at the centre of a struggle to define and articulate the nation and its economic triumph' (Barker 2010, p. 12). Similarly, as Heider suggests, 'in Indonesia there have been sharp but cryptic attacks on "non-Indonesian" influences within the film industry which subverted the true Indonesian cinema' (1994, p. 171). Essentially, national cinema should be understood beyond the frames of institutional

2 The 'war film' is a well-known Hollywood film genre and its narrative spans from World War I to contemporary wars such as the Iraq War. Robert Eberwein suggests three focuses for war films: war or combat itself; non-battle scenes such as training or leisure time; or the effects of war on human relationships, which can incorporate depictions of the home front (2010, p. 45). More than simply narratives about combat, the war film genre deals with universal themes. As Belton (1994, p. 196) explains, 'the war movie is potentially the ultimate form of cinema, creating conditions in which extreme expression of love, hate, action, violence and death can find representation.'

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and geographical confines, instead it is framed by a particular ideological position.

The early film produced in Indonesia Loetoeng Kasaroeng (The Lost Lutung, 1926) directed by G. Kruger (German) and Heuveldorp (Dutch), which featured local talents and adapted folklore, was not considered by film historians as a pioneer of 'Indonesian film' since the central roles in film production were not filled by Indonesians. Moreover, the involvement of Chinese producers in early film production in Indonesia in the 1920s has been dismissed by film historians due to their ethnicity and the nature of the narratives, which did not demonstrate a nationalist spirit even though the films were shot in Indonesia with local actors. Contrary to the history of national Indonesian cinema, Setijadi-Dunn and Barker argue that ethnic Chinese filmmakers made a significant contribution in constructing the first images of Indonesia that 'is not defined by ethnicity, political affiliations, or an obsession towards nationalism based on indigeneity' (2010, p. 39). However, the transnational dimension, which obviously characterized early Indonesian films, was not recognized in the New Order's national film history because it has been overly coloured by an ethno-nationalist ideology.

The ethno-nationalist predilection in the dominant Indonesian cinema history has led to the celebration of an indigenous and nationalist filmmaker as the founder of Indonesian cinema. Unsurprisingly, the first day of the film shooting of Usmar Ismail's Darah dan Doa on 30 March 1950 has been officially established by presidential decree as 'National Film Day' (Hari Film Nasional) in 1999. The decree declared that National Film Day was established to promote the growth and increase the motivation of Indonesian film workers and to boost achievements that can elevate Indonesia's reputation nationally, regionally and globally. More importantly, the main consideration stated in the decree was the fact that for the first time a feature film had been made by an indigenous Indonesian as well as Indonesian company. Although Darah dan Doa was not Usmar's first film, it felt like it was because for the first time, he assumed complete responsibility in the production process:

> Although Tjitra received a better reception from the press, frankly, it reminds me too much of an attachment which I feel restricted my creative power. As such, I prefer to consider Darah dan Doa as my first film, one for which I was entirely responsible. (Usmar 1983, p. 164)

While Usmar adopted Italian neorealism, which might be considered as a 'foreign' aesthetic for a film plot partly inspired by the Long March of the

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Chinese Red Army (from October 1934 to October 1936), he claimed Darah dan Doa to be a wholly 'Indonesian' production:

> Even though I have made two films prior to Darah dan Doa, the latter is my first film. The main reason is that for the first time this film's technical executions and creative planning as well as financial contributions were completed by an all-Indonesian crew. In addition, this is the first Indonesian film which dealt with national events. (Usmar 1983, p. 45)

According to Misbach Yusa Biran (2009), an Indonesian film historian and former film director, Usmar Ismail's early films (such as Harta Karun, Si Bachil, and Tjitra) did not have a 'national consciousness' (*kesadaran nasional*). Furthermore, Darah dan Doa, which Usmar had written, is the first film to depict national events (Usmar 1983, p. 70). During the special retrospective on Usmar Ismail at the 1986 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI), veteran journalist Rosihan Anwar stated that the main characteristics of Usmar's films are patriotism, strong sense of nationalism and passionate idealism; which are the high ideals of life (Arda Muhlisiun 2012, p. 147). This could probably be attributed to Usmar's experience in combat during the post-independence revolutionary period when he enlisted in the army and became a major in Yogyakarta (1945-1949).

While some war films depict the heroic struggles during the Dutch colonial period such as Si Pitung (Nawi Ismail, 1970) and November 1828 (Teguh Karya, 1979), most war films dwell on the revolutionary period (defined as the era after the 1945 Proclamation of Indonesian Independence) valorizing the armed struggle of the newly formed Indonesian government to gain international recognition of its national independence such as Mereka Kembali (They Have Returned, Imam Tantowi, 1972), Bandung Lautan Api (Bandung a Sea of Fire, Alam Rengga Surawidjaja, 1975), Janur Kuning (Yellow Coconut Leaf, Alam Rengga Surawidjaja, 1979), Serangan Fajar (The Dawn Attack, Arifin C. Noer, 1981), Kereta Api Terakhir (The Last Train, Mochtar Soemodimedjo, 1981), Pasukan Berani Mati (Death-Defying Troops, Imam Tantowi, 1982), Tapak-Tapak Kaki Wolter Monginsidi (The Footsteps of Wolter Monginsidi, Frank Rorimpandey, 1982), Soerabaia 45 (Imam Tantowi, 1990) and the like. In particular, the combat scenes are the main event within the narrative, which is imbued with melodramatic elements, but lack detailed sociocultural context. *Tempo* magazine film critic Salim Said (1991b) considered such war films as *dokudrama* (docudrama) due to the presence of historical characters in the film but with the addition of dramatic elements. Clearly, Salim is making a claim about the importance of

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factual elements and the authenticity of the event in war films over fictional films and providing an ontological status of *film perjuangan*.

Making Nationalism Spectacular

Since what film offers is representation, it allows the audience to experience the thrill or nausea of battle without the inconvenience of being shot or blown into pieces. At the same time, the abstract idea of nationalism embodied in war films looks spectacular through the valorization of various battle scenes, shot using techniques that compel audiences to invest emotionally and share in their thrill and excitement. In particular, New Order films encouraged audiences to think of armed struggle as a productive mechanism of progressive political change tied to codes of honour, self-sacrifice and national esteem. This in turn prevents the audience from thinking about the cost of war for survivors as well as those who perished.

Prior to the New Order era, many war films produced in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with the psychological turmoil of veteran soldiers (*pejuang*) in adjusting to society. They also portray the socio-economic conditions during the revolutionary era. According to Krishna Sen (1994, p. 45), there was an appropriation of the nationalist movement in cinema. Rather than simply representing the revolution as 'us' (the Indonesian nation) against 'them' (the Dutch), these war films depict social revolution where 'the fight against the foreigners included an attempt to identify and challenge the structure of repression within Indonesian society' (Sen 1994, p. 45). Meanwhile, film scholar David Hanan (2017) regards the films made in the early independence period by Ismail as well as other similar filmmakers as being more concerned with 'moral' rather than 'cultural' issues. Similar to the Italian neorealist films, these war films encapsulate 'a sense of the ethos of a particular period, an ethos both grim and hopeful, imbued with human courage, but also with austerity, bleakness and, at times, betrayal' (Hanan 2017, p. 298). Thus, it can be argued that pre-New Order war films delved into an array of social and psychological effects of war (as armed struggle) on Indonesian society, which provoked uncertainties or social despair, rather than celebrating war.

After the New Order militaristic regime took power in 1966, war films tend to focus homogenously on the armed struggle against the colonial ruler (*penjajah*) with strong patriotic spirit and nationalist sentiment.[3] The New

3 In the early years of the New Order regime, films became an instrument of military propaganda through the depiction of communists as an evil threat facing the Indonesian nation, as

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Order war films insisted that war should be understood in relation to the powerful discourse of nationalism. Therefore, the ideological function of New Order war films is to make war 'feel' right; thus, the films discourage the audiences from questioning why and how much of life has been wasted in war. The active involvement of military command at the provincial level (Komando Daerah Militer or Kodam) as the main sponsor in terms of financial or logistical support overtly contained military propaganda. For instance, Mereka Kembali (1982) was supported by the West Java Military Command (Divisi Siliwangi), while the East Java Military Command (Kodam Brawijaya) supported Soerabaia 45 (1990). Despite the appearance of revolutionary soldiers and militias, the military as a new organization that formed after independence played a crucial role in the revolutionary war against the Dutch colonials. Indeed, the construction of the military as national saviour is part of the larger attempt of the militarization of historiography in the New Order era (McGregor 2007).

The armed struggle against the colonial rulers is not only the narrative core of the New Order war films but also serves as the main spectacle in those films. In films made during the New Order regime, the crucial role of the army as well as armed struggle is greatly celebrated, particularly as a site to construct the idea of nationhood and spectacularize nationalism through the filmic medium. Moreover, by infusing melodramatic elements (such as women's sacrifice, family separation, the death of family members, romantic relationships between guerrilla soldiers and local women and the like),[4] it constructs the war as armed conflict to be part and parcel of human struggle in order to achieve freedom or liberation from colonial oppression. Unsurprisingly, war films from the New Order era cast young revolutionary soldiers since they aptly epitomize the spirit of freedom as well as symbolize a critique against the conservative and accommodative civil politicians.

Imam Tantowi's Soerabaia 45 (1990), for instance, narrates the heroic battle between pro-independence (revolutionary) soldiers against the British Army that was part of the Allied force to disarm the Japanese Army in

can be seen in Misbach Yusa Biran's Operasi X (Operation X, 1968). In addition, a film such as Awaludin's Piso Komando (Commando Knife, 1967) propagated the marvel of the Regiment of Army Commandos (RPKAD), which was responsible for the destruction of the communist movement in Indonesia in 1965-1966.

4 Melodrama is a popular genre in Asian cinema shaped by social and cultural context. Wimal Dissanayake (1993) identifies the concept of suffering as pivotal to the discourse of film melodrama in Asian cultures. Moreover, unlike Western melodrama, the familial self rather than the individual self is the focus of interest in Asian melodramas.

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Indonesia.[5] Winning the award for best director at the Indonesian Film Festival (FFI), the film is based on the real events of the 10 November 1945 battle in Surabaya (the second biggest city in Indonesia) which symbolizes the Indonesian revolutionary war after the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence. The film was supported by the East Java Province and received a special award from the jury members of FFI 1990 for 'the depiction of the fighting spirit of Indonesia' (*menggambarkan semangat juang Indonesia*).[6]

One scene in this film illustrates an incident in which the commander of the British Army, Brigadier M.A.C. Mallaby, dies in his burning car, thus, triggering an ultimatum from the British Army that urged the revolutionary soldiers and militias to hand over their weapons on 10 November 1945. Roused by the charismatic leader Bung Tomo, young revolutionary soldiers and militias fought against the British and other members of the Allied troops rather than surrendering their weapons. Although only equipped with bamboo spears (*bambu runcing*), the Indonesian revolutionary soldiers bravely confronted the British and Allied forces that were well equipped with modern weapons as shown through close-ups of modern war machines such as tanks, armoured cars and machine guns.

Cinematically, the combat scenes are depicted in a spectacular way through large explosions, fire blasts and sounds of bullets from both rifles and machine guns. The camera shakes when the explosions go off, creating a definite sense of reality; thus, viewers are given an opportunity to share in the soldiers' anxiety as well as the danger of battle. In a very memorable scene, a young revolutionary soldier suicide bombs the British tank during the decisive battle between the Indonesian and Allied armies. To heighten the drama, fallen soldiers and militias are shown in slow motion, accompanied with patriotic music scoring, which highlights the meaningful military sacrifice for the nation.

5 The heroic Battle of Surabaya helped to galvanize Indonesian and international support for Indonesian independence. The 10 November 1945 battle is celebrated annually as 'Heroes' Day' (Hari Pahlawan).

6 Although the Japanese army lost World War II and Indonesia proclaimed its independence on 17 August 1945, the army had not surrendered its weapons to the new Indonesian government nor returned to Japan yet. Instead, Indonesians were still required to act respectfully towards Japanese soldiers as they were still fully armed and in charge of the military headquarters in the city. Young revolutionary Indonesian soldiers wanted the Japanese Army to disarm and grew impatient while the political negotiations with the Japanese army went on. Meanwhile, the British and other members of the Allied military arrived in Indonesia with authorization to disarm the Japanese army and to release the war prisoners. Dutch troops disguised as representatives of NICA (Netherlands Indies Civil Administration) arrived in Indonesia along with the Allied forces in order to restore Dutch power after the Japanese emperor's surrender in the Pacific in August 1945.

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Meanwhile, the combat scenes demonstrate the various noble values such as comradeship, solidarity and martyrdom that are closely related with the idea of nationhood as well as nationalism. The comradeship among soldiers or militias from different social backgrounds symbolizes national unity.[7] Specifically, one scene shows a revolutionary soldier leaving both his wife and child to join others at the war front. This can be interpreted as the love of country surpassing the love of family.

Moreover, to highlight the resistance against the Dutch as a righteous war, the colonial rulers have been constructed as an 'other' in the New Order war films. In the *kompeni* genre (Heider 1991, p. 40), films set during the colonial period, Dutch soldiers are always represented as evil. These soldiers are characteristically depicted as having a fair amount of 'unrestrained sadism' (such as gouging out of eyes, torturing prisoners and the like) and 'sadistic sexuality' in which Dutch soldiers are engaged in sexual violence against village girls. Meanwhile, the *perjuangan* genre (Heider 1991, p. 42) is set during the period when a defeated Japan was yet to withdraw from the Indonesian archipelago up until the Dutch relinquished their claims to Indonesia (15 August 1945-27 December 1949). The Dutch soldiers within this genre are also constructed as brutal, unforgiving and malicious. Those characteristics can be seen in several scenes, such as the torture of ordinary village people in order to obtain information about hiding places of revolutionary soldiers, the slaughter of civilians who are begging for their lives, and the attack and occupation of Yogyakarta city, which breached the current political consensus.[8]

Marginalizing (Unpatriotic) Civilians

While the armed struggle and military actions are depicted as expressing a heroic, patriotic and nationalist spirit, civilian struggles through negotiations

7 The war film originates in a gendered context that valorizes masculinity at a time of war. Robert Eberwein notes that the first American war film Love and War (James H. White, 1899) had an archetypical figure in the war film genre: 'brave, sufficiently strong enough to withstand and recover from his wounds, and a triumphant survivor returning to claim his bride, thus confirming the heterosexual economy of narrative' (2007, p. 11).

8 Such characteristics are slightly different in comparison with the war films set during the pre-national independence period with local heroes. Analysing the nine films produced in 1970s and 1980s, Eric Sasono (2014) found typical characteristics of the Dutch colonials, such as being an infidel, immoral, coarse, ruthless, deceitful and greedy. These characteristics are closely related to an attempt to popularize national identity and the portrayal of Indonesian heroism in the colonial resistance movement in conjunction with national and religious (Islamic) identity.

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(*perundingan*) or a diplomatic avenue in war films might look less patriotic due to the 'lack' of a strong expression of nationalist spirit as they tend to be too accommodating or compromising with the enemy, and thus betray the war cause or revolution. Moreover, the treacherous civilians as enemy collaborators (usually politicians) underscore the futility of a peaceful path or non-military struggle. While it is inevitable that treason in the military during the war existed, the fact that the treacherous characters are quickly and violently executed in order to purify the military of any enemy collaborators or spies is slightly less believable.

Scenes of political negotiation between Indonesians and the Dutch barely appear on screen. Other political negotiations are only mentioned briefly in conversations among revolutionary soldiers with a pejorative undertone. The military groups or revolutionary soldiers view negotiation as nothing but a compromise in dealing with the enemy. They did not regard taking a diplomatic route as supportive of their goal for independence to be recognized at the international level. In the opening scene of Mereka Kembali, the long shot of the long march of Siliwangi division is accompanied by a voice-over: '*Nyatanya perundingan tak membawa hasil* [...] *diplomasi meratakan jalan penjajah*' ('In fact, political negotiation was futile. [...] [D]iplomacy simply clears the path for the colonial rulers'). Similarly, in Soerabaia 45 (1990), the Allied force is represented as breaching the political agreement (consensus) since they began firing on young revolutionary soldiers and militias.

Furthermore, unlike armed struggle, which is portrayed as 'heroic' as well as a 'populist' resistance against the colonists, political negotiations or diplomatic approaches are deemed as 'accommodative' and 'elitist' since only a limited number of actors are involved in the process to achieve the agreement. At the same time, there is no guarantee that the parties involved will consistently abide by the agreement. During the revolutionary era, armed struggle is viewed as compelling by youths who possessed a strong desire for total independence (*merdeka penuh*) from any colonial powers. In contrast, political negotiations not only look far from heroic, but are also viewed as less genuine, if not manipulative, as difficult and time-consuming because they require stellar diplomatic skills. As such, political negotiations can only be performed by a specific group of people who are highly educated, well versed in diplomatic relations and have a wide political perspective. Cinematically, political negotiation scenes might look less attractive and spectacular in comparison with a massive armed struggle. In addition, since war films are sponsored by the military, they are more inclined to show armed struggle that serves the military interest.

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The marginalizing of civilians in the war films can be seen clearly in the role of women – who were often relegated to the role of civilians. In general, most protagonists or hero characters in the war films in the New Order era are male, while female characters occupy peripheral positions. Only a few New Order war films have a strong female protagonist, such as Eros Djarot's Tjoet Nja' Dhien (1988), who is depicted as a political strategist as well as a freedom fighter who led the Aceh people to fight against the Dutch colonial army for six years through guerrilla warfare in the jungles of Aceh. Typically, female characters in mainstream New Order war films are depicted in gendered roles, such as a dutiful wife or a lover of the protagonist (hero); a cook at a temporary kitchen (*dapur umum*); a nurse from the Red Cross; or a prostitute who obtains secret information from the enemy.

In the two New Order propaganda films (Janur Kuning and Serangan Fajar), the main female characters were the wife of Colonel Suharto and that of general Sudirman. In Janur Kuning, both Suharto's and Sudirman's wives pass the weapon to their husbands and sent an affectionate 'goodbye' before they embark for battle. In particular, Suharto's wife was depicted to be in an advanced stage of pregnancy from the moment she is introduced in the film. Indeed, this showed Suharto's sacrifice in leaving his heavily pregnant wife for the battlefield. In the first dialogue in the film, Suharto enquires about his wife's pregnancy, while his concerned wife asks about the war. In other words, Suharto's and Sudirman's wives each fulfil their duty of suffering quietly in order to allow their husbands in the military to join the war. Clearly, this reflects the New Order militaristic regime's gender ideology of 'State Ibuism,' which defined women as wives and mothers, as epitomized in Dharma Wanita, an organization for the wives of civil servants. In the formal hierarchy of this nationwide institution, the position held by women paralleled those held by their husbands (Suryakusuma 2011).

Meanwhile, there are four female characters in Serangan Fajar who fill different roles in the narrative from two different social classes. Sito, who is a daughter from an aristocratic family, joins the youth brigade (along with her brother Danur) as a revolutionary soldier and has a romantic relationship with another revolutionary soldier named Ragil, a servant in her home. Meanwhile, Danur's other sister, Darun, and his mother, Ibu, tend to keep away from the revolution raging outside the high walls around their residence. Two other female characters from a lower-class family (Simbok and Sibu) provided moral support to Ragil and look after Temon (Ragil's nephew). In the climatic air raid by the Dutch Army on Yogyakarta city, Sibu and Simbok became tragic war victims. Their gender as well as their passivity in the armed struggle justifies them as ideal war victims.

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Although some women go to the battlefield as revolutionary soldiers, as can be seen in a few war films, they only occupy marginal roles (not as decision makers) in comparison with their male comrades in the battle. For instance, in Soerabaia 45, one female character from a middle-class family becomes a revolutionary soldier but she is hardly seen in the battlefield. Instead, she helps to evacuate people from Surabaya due to the war. Perhaps this is not unique to Indonesian film, but it can be found almost universally in war films across the world. As Anna Froula points out, 'Warfare's terrain as the site of mythical man-making also doubles as the site of women's actual un-making, as the long sordid history of rape attests' (2014, p. xi). At the same time, women are constructed within a dominant characteristic of femininity as 'a sign of the "nation," namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity and so on' (Chatterjee 1993, p. 131).

As part of the *rakyat* (ordinary masses), women along with children become victims of war. They are usually depicted as helpless, lacking agency and waiting for the revolutionary soldiers to rescue them.[9] This sets up a contrast between the *rakyat* and the military, whose role is not only to fight against the colonial rulers, but also to provide protection for civilians during the war. In one particular scene in Janur Kuning (1979), Suharto expresses his concern regarding the effect of a daylight attack on the people, especially the Dutch retaliation against civilians or non-combatants. Lieutenant Sugiono also articulates Suharto's concern at the meeting: 'We [the army] must demonstrate to the Dutch that the people have no part in this.' Equally, the *rakyat* see themselves as distinct from the military. This can be seen in one scene of Dutch torture when an elderly man is dragged out, pleading, '*Kulo rakyat biasa*' ('I am only an ordinary person').

Contrary to the noble characters of military personnel and revolutionary soldiers, civilians are portrayed as cowards, lenient enough to compromise, as well as less patriotic and nationalist. In Serangan Fajar, the mother (Ibu) and her daughter (Darun) from the aristocratic family are portrayed as obviously less patriotic and nationalist since they seemed to avoid taking part in the revolution which had destroyed the hierarchy between the aristocrats and the working class. Similarly, in Soerabaia 45, the father who worked with the Dutch colonial government in the past viewed the

9 In war films, women are culturally predisposed to accept submissive roles in the violent promotion of nationalism or secession. As Matthew Evangelista (2011, p. 12) remarks, '[Women] would have to assume their role as the passive, protective segment of society in order for men to identify successfully with a militarized masculinity.'

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young revolutionary soldiers and militias as 'ridiculous' and 'foolish' when they insisted on disarming the Japanese Army and fighting the Allied army, although he ultimately relented and supported them in the end. The character of the father might reflect the views of several civilians who opined that the Dutch colonial era was much better than that of the revolutionary era (commonly referred to as the 'normal era' or *zaman normal*).

It is worth noting that non-Indonesians in some war films are represented as participating in espionage activities. This reflects the continuous fear of 'foreign' (i.e. non-Indonesian) intrusion into Indonesian territory and national security rather than the threat of treason. For instance, in Alam Rengga Surawidjaja's Perawan Di Sektor Selatan (Virgin in the South Sector, 1971), a Eurasian girl (Laura) infiltrates the revolutionary group as a Dutch spy because she wanted to avenge the death of her mother by Indonesian militias during the war. By spreading fabricated news among the revolutionary soldiers, she creates frictions among them which led ultimately to a deadly conflict. Interestingly, a Chinese businessman supports Laura's act since he did not wish to involve himself in the Indonesian revolution. To add to the dramatic element, the Chinese businessman's daughter falls in love with a revolutionary soldier, which suggests the attractiveness and righteousness of the armed struggle.

Perhaps M.T. Risyaf's award-winning Naga Bonar (1987) is a rare exception among the war films produced during the New Order era.[10] Based on a story by Asrul Sani, Naga Bonar features a former petty criminal, a pickpocket, as the titular main character. Unlike the stereotypical male protagonist in most Indonesian war films, Naga Bonar was a considerably less muscular man who feared his own mother. As a 'general,' or chief commander, he is ineffectual in persuading his own mother to move to a safe area. Consequently, he is forced to carry her along the way during the evacuation process. When his sidekick, Bujang, dies unnecessarily in a battle (during which Bujang himself, wearing all of Naga Bonar's insignia and medals, led to prove his patriotism), Naga Bonar sheds tears in front of his troops. Indeed, even though his aide (Lukman) advises him to stop

10 This film received awards for five categories (original story, script, male actor, female supporting actor and sound design) at the annual Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) in 1987. In the history of Indonesian film festivals, it was quite rare that a comedy film was regarded as a serious work and received several awards. This film was also Indonesia's submission for the 60th Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, but was not accepted as a nominee. In 2007, the sequel named Naga Bonar Jadi 2 (Naga Bonar Becomes Two) was released. Perhaps comedy films that satirize the armed struggle in Indonesian history were not deemed to be serious criticisms against the military by the New Order authorities.

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showing his grief in order to prevent the demoralization of his army, Naga Bonar refuses to do so. Although this scene may highlight the comradeship or male bonding in the war, it reveals the repressed emotional side of the male hero in the film. In essence, the character of Naga Bonar defies the common stereotypical traits of a male hero in New Order war films because of the satirical character of the film.

However, while Naga Bonar comically narrates armed struggle during the revolutionary period, the diplomatic approach is perceived as too soft in dealing with the enemy. Naga Bonar is repeatedly shown saying, '*Berunding-berunding, NICA masuk juga!*' ('Despite continuous negotiating, NICA invaded anyway!'). He does not believe that negotiation is the best way to defeat the enemy. Instead, he prefers armed struggle since it clearly embodies the patriotic and nationalist spirit. Naga Bonar witnesses how the Dutch easily broke a mutual agreement between two countries by continuously attacking and then eventually occupying some Indonesian territories. The closing scene of Naga Bonar shows the battle between Indonesian and the Dutch armies led by Naga Bonar (as a general) accompanied by his lover, Kirana. In the midst of the battle he reads a patriotic poem: '*Hai pemuda Indonesia / Bangkitlah kau semua / Negeri kita sudah merdeka*' ('All young people of Indonesia / Let's rise up / Our country is now free').

While Naga Bonar in many ways breaks some conventions of New Order war films, it still depicts female characters in stereotypical roles. Unlike masculine identity, feminine identity in this film is not tied to violent defence of the nation, but with non-violent nurturing roles. Prior to joining the battlefield, Kirana occupied a marginal role as she only stayed at home and completed domestic chores. In typical war film mode – as carer and nurse to the male warrior – she is shown bandaging a wounded Naga Bonar affectionately after he rescues her. Women play supporting roles in the revolution and this is evident in the characterization of Emak, Naga Bonar's mother, and the other important female character in the film. She is painted in a negative light as she is regarded as fussy (*cerewet*) and manipulative of her son. A traditional matriarch, she still treats him as a child and fiercely pushes him to leave his petty criminal past behind. Thus, she is positioned as a supporter of the nationalist cause as she moulds Naga Bonar, a commander in chief (*jenderal*) of the armed struggle, into becoming a patriotic hero and a nationalist. As Matthew Evangelista states, 'The more women betray their feminine nature by opposing violence and fearing war, the more it falls to men to fulfil their masculine duty to fight' (2011, p. 18).

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Conclusion

War films have been typically associated with the 'birth of the nation' as well as the beginnings of 'national cinema' history. It would be of no surprise that war films have become an apt medium to express patriotic and nationalist sentiments, while emptying out any 'foreign' or 'non-Indonesian' elements both in the context of production and their narrative. In particular, the combat scenes serve as the main spectacle of war films which through visual as well as narrative modalities construct an abstract idea of nationhood while creating a spectacle of nationalism. The combat scenes also demonstrate noble values, such as solidarity, comradeship (male bonding), martyrdom and heroism in defending the nation shaped by male biased militarized nationalism. It should be stated that since warfare's terrain becomes the site for the construction of virile masculinity, warfare preserves conventional gender roles by relegating female actors to stereotypical roles, casting them along with children as war victims who wait passively to be rescued by the male hero.

By occupying the centre of the narrative, the military as well as armed struggle in the war films effectively marginalize the role of civilians and depict political negotiations or diplomatic avenues in a negative light. Political negotiations are prone to betray patriotic armed struggles since they tend to be accommodative to the colonial rulers' interests, while the foreign enemy is depicted as easily breaching the political consensus. The presence of treacherous civilian characters (politicians), who become enemy collaborators in the war films served as clear evidence of the futility of pursuing a peaceful path to freedom. Meanwhile, war films construct the Dutch colonialists as enemies by setting them up against the noble characters of military and Indonesian revolutionary soldiers. Thus, armed struggle can be justified as liberating Indonesian people from evil Dutch oppression and colonization.

The strong patriotic spirit and nationalist sentiment did not diminish after the collapse of Suharto's New Order militaristic regime in 1998. Financially supported by Hashim Djojohadikusumo (brother of presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto), the 'Trilogi Merdeka' (Trilogy of Freedom) consists of Merah Putih (Red and White, 2009), Merah Putih 2: Darah Garuda (Red and White Part 2: The Blood of Garuda, 2011) and Hati Merdeka (Liberated Heart, 2011), which were set during the revolutionary period and emulated characteristics of war films from the New Order era. Indeed, the production context of those films is completely different from the New Order era since they are made in order to boost the image of a patriotic

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and nationalist leader who would run for the presidential election in 2014 and 2019. As such, those films still employ a propagandistic style, which tend to construct a simplistic binary opposition ('us' and 'them'), thus, echoing a paradoxical, strong ethno-nationalist sentiment in the current post-national era.

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Section 2

Key Directors

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Introduction: Key Directors

Gaik Cheng Khoo

In the current millennium, Southeast Asian film auteurs have been gaining international recognition at A-list European and Asian film festivals, while their films receive critical attention overseas. However, Southeast Asian cinema history is not short of auteurs, loosely defined here as filmmakers with a body of work that carries a certain personal signature. This section pays tribute to veteran filmmakers and directors from the region who are lesser known in the English-speaking world. Although acknowledged as masters or auteurs in their home countries, such individuals have actually had very few studies dedicated to them and their work. Malay film director Hussain Haniff (often hidden by the towering figure of P. Ramlee and thus, compared here with Ramlee), Mike de Leon (who, as Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal's junior, also tends to be overshadowed by these giants), Indonesian directors Teguh Karya and Sjuman Djaya (often compared to Usmar Ismail), and the oft-romanticized Thai master Ratana Pestonji (who stands out as the sole visionary Thai auteur of that period), all fit this mould.

Notably, the careers of these influential figures largely spanned the Cold War era, when American imperial and political influence exercised power in the region in the form of US support for authoritarian regimes like Marcos's in the Philippines or Suharto's New Order. These filmmakers are often described as directors with integrity who, while immersed in the national film industry making mainstream films, also managed to make some pointed critiques at the societies they lived and worked in, whether it is the increasing class disparity and issues facing the poor or young widows (Ainslie; Hanan and Soehadi), ethnic minorities' plight in Jakarta (Hanan and Soehadi), corrupt feudalism (Driskell), or state violence and human rights violations (Campos). Such figures are noticeably all male, and the women directors working during this era that the section could not cover should also be mentioned. These include Ida Farida in Indonesia (active from 1979-1991), who in turn was encouraged by the late female director Sofia W.D. (b. 1924-1986), Rosa Mia in the late 1950s and 1960s of the Philippines with Laurice Guillen and Marilou Diaz-Abaya in the 1970s-1980s, while Nguyen Viet Linh made six features in Vietnam between 1986 and 2002.

In their respective countries, Hussain Haniff and Ratana Pestonji were best known as serious auteurs for formal innovations in filmmaking (Hussain for the first-time use of the crane shot in Malay films in the 1961 film

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Hang Jebat and Pestonji for making films on 35mm at a time when Thai mainstream films were 16mm silent films that were dubbed) and received critical attention for their quality films. Both men died before their time; Hussain Haniff of stomach cancer at 39, and Ratana of a heart attack after making an impassioned speech for more governmental support of Thai filmmaking in 1970. Ainslie's chapter on Ratana which relies on archival documents, and in particular the *Far East Film News*, explores Ratana's close ties to Hollywood studios in his early career, thus contradicting the later construction of his position as being against American imperialism in pushing for more state support for local films. Using P. Ramlee as anchor, Driskell also draws from film magazines and newspaper articles of the period in his portrait of Hussain Haniff. The only living film director in this section is Mike de Leon who, after seventeen years of retirement from the industry, returned in 2018 to make Citizen Jake, a film that addresses political corruption, bourgeois guilt and historical revisionism since President Rodrigo Duterte gave Marcos a hero's burial (Campos). If the earlier section therefore provided close readings of important films as well as contextualized the post-war industry and wartime filmmaking, this section then helps to enrich our understanding of the personal choices individual directors made, decisions that in turn shaped the cinematic legacy they bequeathed us.

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6 Two Auteurs in the Indonesian Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s: Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya

David Hanan and Gaston Soehadi

Abstract

This chapter discusses key films by Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya, two Indonesian writer-directors who emerged in the early Suharto era of the 1970s. Sjuman Djaya was trained in the Soviet Union, and on his return to Indonesia made films that engaged – in very spirited and original ways – with the popular culture of the poor and with social issues and Indonesian history. Teguh Karya founded a collective that trained young people in theatre arts but quickly branched into filmmaking. His early films were popular romantic melodramas, which established an audience and created major stars. Later, Teguh made a celebrated historical film, addressed poverty and dislocation in the society, the position of women, and even made one political allegory.

Keywords: popular culture, religion, history, political allegory, Indonesian cinema

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s two writer-directors were particularly prominent in Indonesian cinema: Sjuman Djaya (1933-1985) and Teguh Karya (1937-2001). Both directors received numerous awards at the annual Indonesian Film Festival (FFI); both at times had significant commercial success, but both also saw themselves as primarily artists of the Indonesian cinema, with stories and perceptions they wanted to communicate to their audiences. Both wrote their own screenplays, and both had unique and distinctive ways of working.

Khoo, Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (eds), *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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Sjuman Djaya set up his own production company, Matari Film, with the aim of being in control of his own material, subject though to censorship, including pre-censorship at the script stage, obligatory for much of the Suharto New Order period. Teguh Karya had founded a theatre collective (known as 'Teater Populer') and was a theatre director well before he became a director of films. The Teater Populer collective became the centre from which his films were made, with actors in the collective being the main actors in his films.

Rather than attempting to provide complete coverage of all the films written and directed by these two directors (a total of some 28 films, 15 by Sjuman Djaya and 13 by Teguh Karya), this chapter explores major films, and major creative phases in their careers; the sectors of their society and social discourses with which each engaged; and aspects of their relation to the repressive Suharto New Order regime (1967-1998), as well as their resistance to it and to its forms of censorship.

The Suharto New Order regime came to power following the events of the night of 30 September 1965, when left-wing members of the palace guard attempted to arrest leading right-wing generals, fearing a coup against President Sukarno. Six generals died. General Suharto, Head of Army Security, intervened within hours, quickly blaming the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as a whole. Over the next months, army divisions, with the help of Islamic youth, and with advice from the United States, arrested rank-and-file members of the PKI. At least 500,000 were executed in this mass slaughter, but thousands were imprisoned for a decade or more, thus extinguishing the left in Indonesia. Over the next two years President Sukarno was forced to give over power to Suharto. The repressive and increasingly corrupt New Order regime continued for 31 years.

Throughout the last five years of the Sukarno period there had been mounting antagonism between the left and right in Indonesia, even in the cultural areas, and in August 1964 leftist movements opposing American cultural imperialism succeeded in having American films banned (Sen 1994, p. 34). With Suharto in power, American films were screened again in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the new government did develop policies to encourage the growth of an Indonesian film industry, with some success, especially given that Indonesian films for the first time were now being made in colour and widescreen. Whereas the number of films produced in the 1950s was 35 films per year, and in the 1960s, less than 20 per year, the number of films produced in Indonesia between 1970 and 1990 averaged about 70 films per year. Moreover, whereas in the 1950s Malay-language films produced in Singapore had been popular in Indonesia, with the decline of Malay cinema in the early 1970s Indonesian films became popular in

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Malaysia. Nevertheless, in Indonesia American films were screened in better class cinemas, where the profits were made, while Indonesian films were relegated to the lesser cinemas. It was in this early New Order context that Teguh Karya and Sjuman Djaya began to make films.[1]

While all the films of these directors were made during the New Order period, we would not refer to them as 'New Order directors.' An examination of their films does not reveal any clear complicity with New Order ideologies – of the kind manifested in the New Order propaganda films discussed by Budi Irawanto (this volume, Chapter 5) – even if only a few of the films by Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya show resistance to the New Order. Rather, both these directors were artists of integrity who strove to develop creative frameworks within which they and others could work, despite the repressive political environment and unequal social conditions within which they found themselves.

Educational and Social Backgrounds

Sjuman Djaya was born into a Central Javanese Muslim family, but grew up in the North Jakarta suburb of Kemayoran, where his family settled. He attended a Taman Siswa school, a school for Indonesians founded by nationalists. Even at school he was known for writing short stories and poems. By the time he was 23 he had already had two of his stories produced as films (Sinematek Indonesia 1979). At a time when Indonesia, with Sukarno as president, was on friendly terms with the Soviet Union, Sjuman Djaya was awarded a scholarship to study at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow and achieved in his final year the best result ever achieved by a foreign candidate in some 45 years. On his return to Jakarta he was appointed Head of the Directorate of Film in the Indonesian Department of Information, continuing in that position until 1968, where among other things he established a (short-lived) National Film Production Council to subsidize quality film projects. Although Sjuman had studied in Moscow, he was accepted by the anti-communist New Order government. After all, he was a Muslim and did not show support for communism. In the late 1960s he wrote screenplays for others but was also appointed founding dean of the Academy of Cinematography in the newly established Jakarta Institute of the Arts. He did not direct his first feature film until 1971.

1 For more detailed information about the Suharto New Order Regime and its attempts to control cinema, see Sen (1994, passim) and Hanan (2017, Chapters 2 and 3).

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Teguh Karya's background provides an interesting contrast. Teguh was born into a Chinese family in Banten, to the west of Jakarta, in 1937, his name at that time being Steve Liem Tjoan Hok. By 1957 Steve Liem was a student at the Akademi Teater Nasional Indonesia (ATNI), where his most influential teachers included pioneering members of the post-independence Indonesian film industry: Usmar Ismail, Djajakusuma and Asrul Sani, who had commenced making films in the early 1950s. In 1961 he was given a scholarship to study drama at the University of Hawaii. On his return to Jakarta he himself taught theatre at ATNI. As supplementary employment he worked as stage manager of a theatre located in the recently built five-star Hotel Indonesia in central Jakarta. In October 1968 he founded his Teater Populer collective, which largely drew its membership from his students at ATNI, including the young actor Slamet Rahardjo (Nano Riantiarno 1993, p. 12). These Teater Populer productions attracted growing audiences of creative people from numerous walks of life. In the early 1970s the Indonesian film industry, which had declined markedly in the politically troubled 1960s, began to re-emerge. To ensure its future, the Teater Populer collective decided to make a film, with Steve Liem, who had now taken the name Teguh Karya (which means 'tight work') as the main writer-director.

Sjuman Djaya

The first film both written and directed by Sjuman Djaya was Lewat Tengah Malam (Past Midnight, 1971), a story about a former freedom fighter, now a wealthy bandit driving an Alfa Romeo, who robs from the rich (especially from now corrupt, former comrades in the struggle for Indonesian independence) to give to poor villagers, leaving the seal of a black hand as a sign of his visit. At the same time, he is involved in a romance with the idealistic daughter of one of his supporters. The *Katalog Film Indonesia* suggests that a combination of social concern and a romantic (indeed rebellious) outlook marks this film as a forerunner of the distinctive ethos of many of Sjuman's films (Kristanto 2005, p. 84).

In 1973 Sjuman produced two films that prefigured major themes in his career. One was a political allegory, Si Mamad. The other, Si Doel, Anak Betawi (Si Doel, Child of the Betawi), celebrated the lives of the Betawi poor and particularly their children. The ethnic group the Betawi (the term comes from Batavia, the Dutch name for Jakarta) are said to be the original inhabitants of Jakarta, for they are the city's oldest ethnic group, made up of descendants of servants and slaves brought to the city from other parts of

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the Indonesian islands, and elsewhere, to serve the needs of the colonizers, from the early seventeenth century onwards.

The film SI MAMAD was partly inspired by Anton Chekhov's two-page short story 'The Death of a Government Clerk' (1883). The film, more complex than Chekhov's short story, tells of a poor, middle-aged Muslim civil servant, Mamad, working in a lowly position in a government archive, who is faced with expenses incurred by the impending birth of his seventh child. In desperation, he steals stationary from the archive and sells it to a store dealing in office supplies, only to discover that the store is owned by the director of the archive. This droll comedy-drama engages with increasingly pervasive corruption in Indonesia, especially nepotism (upper-level staff in the archive are relatives of the director), and the practice of using an official government position to enhance one's own wealth (the store would appear to be supplying the archive with its office needs). Mamad's scrupulous response to all this is to repeatedly attempt to apologize to the archive director, even at high society social gatherings, causing great embarrassment to the corrupt director. Eventually the over-stressed Mamad has a stroke, and the film ends with his death and ascent to heaven, his final moments being represented by a montage of his children, no longer dressed as slum children, enrobed in purple mourning gowns and ritually chanting praise, intercut with conflicting images from the dying Mamad's mind of his children playing on merry-go-rounds and toy trains in a New Order-sponsored, utopian, fantasy children's playground.

This carefully thought out comedy-drama moves between pathos and droll absurdist humour. It does not let pathos get out of hand, however, but utilizes subtle modulations of tone. While the realization that his wife is pregnant again is a moment of accumulated despair for Mamad, the film celebrates this news of a child to be born, by intercutting Mamad's shocked realization with extended night scenes of young men in a nearby street ecstatically dancing a *joget* (a highly rhythmic and affective dance), in a state of semi-trance. The film thus uses a montage between scenes to steer clear of melodrama, and also to denote and celebrate how the very poor in Jakarta still manage to find meaning in their lives. In Moscow, Sjuman had learned his lessons from Eisenstein well, as this further adaptation of montage methods to a sound film shows. Nevertheless, replying to a criticism by Salim Said that some of his films were too slow, and this was due to him being trained in the USSR, Sjuman said in a lecture: 'In my film SI MAMAD I wanted to make a poetic film about a middle-aged man. How could I have made a film of this length if it did not have some poetry in it?' (Winarno 1977). Sjuman argued that although some of his films moved

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slowly, this was not due to a Russian influence, but because the pace was appropriate to his treatment of a theme.

Si Mamad was made at a time of growing concern among the public at increasing corruption at upper levels of Indonesian society. In January 1974 Jakarta witnessed the most significant, anti-government student protests since the establishment of the New Order seven years earlier. The students protested against rising prices, corruption and government favouritism towards Japanese economic interests. Known as the Malari riots, these violent protests were prompted by the state visit of the Japanese prime minister. They were soon suppressed by the Suharto regime. Two films made later in his career would consolidate Sjuman's reputation as a critic of the regime.

The second major strand of Sjuman's oeuvre was his celebration in three films of the demonstrative Betawi – with their earthy humour and reciprocity – as an ethnic group. The first of these, Si Doel Anak Betawi, is based on a realistic, comic, and yet rather downbeat novel written in the 1930s by Aman Datuk Madjoindo. Sjuman's film on the contrary is upbeat and joyful, despite its story of a Betawi boy who must fend for himself and his mother after the father dies in a truck accident. The film includes at points musical numbers performed by Betawi children dancing as in a Hollywood musical, while swinging from trees or running through rice fields. Betawi comedy, using Betawi dialect and humour, had been popularized by the numerous B-movies by the Betawi singer Benyamin S since the early 1970s (Hanan and Basoeki Koesasi 2011). Sjuman produced a more carefully scripted, thought out and innovative film than these rapidly made B-movies. Benyamin S himself appears in Sjuman's film as Doel's father, and Sjuman plays a family friend and eventual stepfather of Doel, after Doel's father's death, thus overtly expressing his solidarity with the Betawi. Sjuman knew the Betawi well. The suburb in which he grew up, Kemayoran, had a large Betawi population.

This film, and the other Betawi films by Sjuman and Benyamin, created a taste and a point of reference within Indonesian popular culture which resulted 20 years later, in 1994, in the development of a television serial, Si Doel Anak Sekolahan (Educated Doel) produced, directed and starring Rano Karno, who as a boy had played Doel in Sjuman's 1973 film. This television serial was an 'audience unifier' (Loven 2008, p. 2). It became the longest-running television serial ever produced in Indonesia, its screenings finally concluding in 2006. In this way an historically marginalized ethnic group and popular culture came to have a central place in the people's imagination.

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With the later Si Doel Anak Modern (Si Doel, A Modern Lad, 1976), Sjuman updates Si Doel Anak Betawi with a grown-up, upwardly socially mobile Doel, moving from his quiet rural Muslim village to the get-rich-quick atmosphere of rapidly changing, contemporary New Order Jakarta of the mid-1970s.[2] In this early postmodern farce, a good-natured larrikin Doel, wearing an Afro haircut, socializes with – and emulates the lifestyles of – land speculators, film stars and pop musicians, who are themselves emulating stereotyped Western lifestyles. But in the last of these Betawi films, Pinangan (A Proposal, 1976), loosely based on Anton Chekhov's one-act play, Sjuman returns to the world of contemporary poor Betawi, the film largely shot in a fishing village on the fringes of Jakarta, where a Betawi proposes to the daughter of a pretentious local Javanese aristocrat. At points the film broadly follows the style of traditional Betawi theatre, *lenong Betawi*, even dispensing with plot, as Sjuman stages lengthy comic scenes in a *warung*, and depicts with great humour the kinds of energetic conversations that partially employed, loquacious, mutually supportive, poor Betawi have with one another.

A third major stream in Sjuman's oeuvre is his concern with Javanese in a traditional society confronting a changing modern world. This is seen in Raden Ajeng Kartini (1982), his nearly three-hour film biography of the Javanese proto-feminist R.A. Kartini (1879-1904). Here, Kartini is shown not only pioneering women's education and writing the letters that ultimately document for posterity her unique struggle, but also addressing the anomalous position of her mother, the second wife, in effect a concubine, marginalized in a patriarchal, Javanese Muslim aristocratic community. But the conflict between tradition and changing values is seen even more strikingly in his dynamic 1974 film Atheis, based on the novel *Atheis* (1949) by Achdiat Karta Mihardja, and set in the period 1920 to 1945. Both novel and film deal with conflicts experienced by an idealistic young Muslim man, Hasan, from a family adhering to a repressive Muslim sect, when as a young adult he encounters, through his friends, modern secular ideas about religion and social change, and particularly atheistic communism, and a woman's right to freedom in the way she lives. The film culminates with tragic events that occur at the time of the surrender of occupying Japanese forces, after the bombing of Hiroshima.

Atheis is notable for its attempts not only to show Hasan's struggle with his religion, but also for its engagement with positive aspects of Islam. For example, in both novel and film there are scenes where Hasan attempts to

2 For parallels in the Thai context, see Khuankaew (this volume, Chapter 13).

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pray, but finds he is distracted by intrusive thoughts. This is taken further in the film, where in two scenes Sjuman uses animation and dynamic symbols in an attempt to emulate forms of Sufi meditation, in addition to showing that Hasan does not always succeed in his meditation. Achdiat Karta Mihardja, who was a liberal Muslim and who saw the film, regarded this change as a welcome addition to his work (Achdiat Karta Mihardja 1989).

A further aspect of the film is its not unsympathetic portrait of the communist revolutionary, Hasan's friend, Rusli. The gregarious and charismatic Rusli advocates both social reform and liberation from colonialism, and he identifies with the idea of world revolution as a means to these ends. But he is not presented as a would-be totalitarian communist enforcer. The negative aspects of agnosticism and atheism are presented in the character of Anwar, an anarchist (brilliantly played by Farouk Afero) who professes to have no values. It can be argued that both novel and film adopt the Dostoevskian stratagem of character-pairing as a way of dramatizing and differentiating complex ideas and their social consequences (Bakhtin 1984, p. 28). At the film's climax, Hasan kills the drunken Anwar with a razor in a sudden paroxysm of deluded anger over Anwar's supposed treatment of their mutual friend, the young widow, Kartini. It may now be surmised that this change in the original story is Sjuman's indirect comment on Muslim rage at supposedly broad Communist Party support for the killing of six generals on the night of 30 September 1965, leading subsequently to Muslim participation in the Suharto-inspired, army-led mass executions of alleged communists. Atheis was only ever released in a heavily censored version.

Atheis is therefore a multi-dimensional film. It engages critically with Islam, and it also imagines Islam in its more positive aspects. It raises the question of whether strict adherence to a narrow set of beliefs can result in a restriction of the mind that becomes an obstacle to engagement with the modern world. It suggests that such restrictions can encourage a fanaticism that can even be triggered into deluded righteous violence in the name of Allah. But it also takes the viewer into the history of Islam and its various sects in Java, and, most notably, in its meditation scenes the film also gives dimension to Islamic prayer and the ways in which it can strengthen the self.

In 1978 and 1984 Sjuman made films clearly critical of Indonesia under the New Order. The first of these, Yang Muda, Yang Bercinta (Young, in Love), was initially censored by eighteen minutes by the Censorship Board, but then banned entirely in the Greater Jakarta region by the army. At the centre of the film is a young, radical student poet from a middle-class family, who criticizes the social order and has a growing student following,

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but who is shown to be irresponsible in his personal life, especially when he gets his girlfriend pregnant and refuses to take responsibility. At the end of this protractedly moralizing but frequently provocative film (even in its sex scenes), the poet, played by the genuinely radical poet Rendra, has reformed and his personal domestic attitudes are shown to be consonant with the idealism of his poetry. There is a contradiction in the film's double agenda, in that an idealistic radical is conveniently shown also to be a hypocrite. However, the screenplay was not written by Sjuman, but by the conservative academic, Dr Umar Kayam. Sjuman augments the film with scenes of recitals of Rendra's dynamic protest poetry, on campus at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta, and at a large candle-lit student gathering in Bandung, and also with scenes of high society parties, where the expressed aim of participants is to network with government officials to secure corrupt business deals, and where drug dealing is shown. The grounds the army gave for banning the film were that it contained propaganda, was agitational and could incite the public (Film Indonesia n.d.).

Sjuman's penultimate film, Kerikil Kerikil Tajam (Sharp Gravel, 1984) has been described as the Sjuman Djaya film most directly critical of the moral and social bankruptcy of the 'development' polices of the Suharto New Order (Kristanto 2005, p. 259). The film opens with a series of quite dramatic, partly humorous scenes showing pervasive corruption in a poor coastal village in south-central Java, and the underlying causes for it. Then, in a series of episodes it shows the journey of two sisters, one of them a young teenager, as they travel from this village to find work, eventually arriving in Jakarta. On the way the film critiques many aspects of this stressed Third World society that are commonly experienced by unempowered women from poorer classes: exploitative working conditions not able to be addressed for fear of being sacked; bullying, denigration and patronization by wealthy classes and by officials; frequent sexual harassment both in the workplace and elsewhere; homelessness. Despite its theme, the film is not melodramatic, due to the sharpness and pertinence of its observations. The centrality of young women here indicates that a continuing concern with situations faced by women of different classes in Indonesian society was a fourth major concern in Sjuman's oeuvre.

Although the charismatic Sjuman was frequently in the public eye, his films did not always do well at the box office. Two of the most important films produced by his Matari company (Si Mamad and Atheis) survive only in the form of 16mm dupe negatives because the original 35mm negatives were destroyed by the studio in Tokyo that had processed them when Sjuman could not pay what he owed to it. Nevertheless, Sjuman had one huge box

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office success, Kabut Sutra Ungu (Mist of Purple Silk, 1980), a Sirkian melodrama about a young, upper-middle-class widow in Jakarta, based on a novel by Ike Supomo and starring Jenni Rachman. This very popular film has considerable sophistication: it is a critique of the prejudice directed at younger widows in middle-class Jakarta at the time; it also foregrounds its own storytelling techniques, with on occasions elaborate tracking shots, and with its happy ending featuring the heroine marrying the brother of her late husband (a Garuda pilot killed in a commercial air accident), both brothers played by the same actor. The success of Kabut Sutra Ungu undoubtedly helped Sjuman finance Raden Ajeng Kartini two years later, also starring Jenni Rachman.

Teguh Karya

By 1971 Teguh Karya's Teater Populer collective had built a regular audience of 3000 for their stage productions and decided it was now time to make a film. Teguh's first film, Wajah Seorang Laki Laki (Face of a Man), set in the 1830s, is a drama about a conflicted young man of Portuguese descent, Amallo, uncertain about his emotional relationships, both with his father and with his girlfriend. This stylish psychological drama is set in a Portuguese community in a village outside of the Dutch capital, Batavia, and in the Batavia harbour area. It begins with a flashback to its tragic ending, when Amallo is mistakenly shot dead by his father when he tries to steal Dutch-owned horses in his father's charge, while attempting to leave the village to make a new life for himself and his siblings. This story, devised by Teguh, provided a perfect role for his charismatic young lead actor, Slamet Rahardjo, and the harbour scenes could be filmed on still-surviving, authentic locations. Moreover, the film provided opportunities to portray a variety of ethnic groups, not only Portuguese and Dutch, but Chinese women running a brothel in Batavia, and Javanese rebels, and at the same time to focus on the contradictions in the emotional life of his James Dean-like central character. Teguh regarded the film as one of his best. However, while being a critical success, it was a commercial failure. In 1984 Teguh produced another period film with a passionate and confused hero, Doea Tanda Mata (Two Souvenirs), this time set in the 1930s.

Aware that his first film had little commercial appeal, Teguh then resolved to learn about what popular cinema is, and spent two years doing so (Soehadi 2015, pp. 90-100). This involved paying attention to what films were most popular in Indonesia. In view of the recent success of Wim

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Umboh's Pengantin Remaja (Teenage Bride, 1971), a film influenced by the high-grossing Hollywood success Love Story (Arthur Hiller, 1970), and knowing his own temperament, Teguh chose romantic drama as the genre in which he would make a popular film. Teguh then persuaded producers that he now wished to make a commercially successful film. He would make a film entitled Cinta Pertama (First Love, 1973) about problems between teenagers and their parents, which would have wide audience appeal. Interviewed two decades later, Teguh stated that he deliberately used a luxury house as the main setting and showed expensive cars in order to make the film seem 'like a dream' to viewers (Soehadi 2015, 102). After seven years of the New Order government, Indonesian audiences craved to see the new affluence attained by elite groups in Jakarta. Teguh then set out to find a suitable co-star to play the partner-in-romance of his male lead, Slamet Rahardjo. In the course of doing so he discovered Christine Hakim, who would become over the next fifteen years the most highly esteemed star in Indonesian cinema.

Cinta Pertama uses the narrative conventions of the teen romance genre, but here the romance is between an 18-year-old teenager, Ade, the daughter of a rich businessman, and the sensitive and courteous Bastian, who is 24 years old and comes from a lower-class background. The first third of the film, in which the couple gradually come to know each other, is very romantic. However, eventually the audience learns that Bastian is a convicted wife killer, released after four years in jail for manslaughter, although Bastian has not told Ade of this.

Cinta Pertama won ten awards at the 1973 Indonesian Film Festival and was an undoubted commercial success. It established both Christine Hakim and Slamet Rahardjo as leading stars of the Indonesian cinema. Over the next five years Teater Populer made four more romantic melodramas – mainly about romances or marriage problems of young people from different class backgrounds – thus consolidating its commercial viability. The last of these films, Badai Pasti Berlalu (The Storm Will Pass, 1977) was the most commercially successful. There was some variety in this output. Kawin Lari (The Elopement, 1975), loosely based on Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), was partly a comedy. One aspect of these films is that the male lead, frequently played by Slamet Rahardjo, is often both an attractive and an unreliable presence, the object of investigation by a suspicious audience, even though, as in the case of Bastian, he is partially exonerated at the end of the film. This reverses a common paradigm in Hollywood cinema, where the woman is the object of the investigative gaze of the camera. Clearly Teguh believed that men were less reliable and less

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honest than women, although his intuitions were not theoretically based. The class differences in Teguh's 1970s romantic melodramas, particularly in Ranjang Pengantin (The Marriage Bed, 1974) and Perkawinan Dalam Semusim (Marriage in a Season, 1976), underlined the fact that Indonesia was an unequal society that was very stressful for the poor.

In 1979, Teguh completed a major historical film, November 1828, set during the Java War (1825-1830), a war that broke out in Central Java ten years after the Dutch began to impose a colonial bureaucratic state on Java in 1814. The film depicts resistance by Javanese villagers to the establishment of a fort inside their village by Dutch forces attempting to put down the rebellion. The forces mainly consist of 'Indos,' mixed race soldiers brought from other islands in the Indonesian archipelago. The making of this film came to involve other significant Indonesian artists from outside Teater Populer, including renowned dancer Sardono W. Kusumo, who plays the *warok*, the spiritual leader of the dance troupe involved in the attempt to assassinate the Indo commander as he watches their *jatilan* performance. The film was loosely based on a Spanish play, Immanuel Robles's *Montserrat* (1947), a play about resistance to colonialism in Bolivia, a play in which Teguh had acted in an ATNI production in the 1950s.

November 1828 won numerous awards at the Indonesian Film Festival in 1979 and is a landmark within Indonesian cinema. It is also one of the Indonesian films about which there has been most academic debate. In a lengthy discussion of cultural difference, Hanan has argued that the film shows the communality of the Javanese in contrast to the individualism of the Dutch-influenced Indos, drawing attention to similar contrasts in body language between Javanese rebels and Dutch officers in a famous nineteenth-century painting by Raden Saleh depicting the arrest in 1830 of the Javanese leader in the war, *Diponegoro Captured at Magelang* (Hanan 2017, pp. 195-200). In fact, in the film Prince Diponegoro is not depicted at all, and even his lieutenant, Sentot Prawirodirdjo, depicted in Islamic garb (Islam was an important rallying point in this war) receives only limited attention, thus centring the film's attention on the ordinary Javanese villagers. Teguh's view of the war (a war which ended with a Dutch victory) as very much the result of growing popular rebellion against newly imposed colonialism, despite its aristocratic leadership, is in accord with that of major historians of the period (Ricklefs 2008, p. 142; Carey 2008, p. 504). However, one film scholar has suggested that the film is 'a perfect historical text of the New Order,' because in it military campaigns are seen as a key part of an anti-colonial struggle (Sen 1988, p. 58), a view conveniently held by the Suharto New Order, which played down the role of diplomacy in the

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late 1940s (see also Irawanto, this volume, Chapter 5). However, NOVEMBER 1828 says nothing about Indonesian history in the twentieth century, is not unfaithful to nineteenth-century history, and it does not purvey New Order views of history, as other films did. Indeed, the film could have been made in the Sukarno period, if the resources were available.

The critical success of NOVEMBER 1828, following BADAI PASTI BERLALU, gave Teguh a much freer hand in choosing his topics, and this led to him making three remarkable films in the last decade of his film-directing career.

DIBALIK KELAMBU (Behind the Mosquito Net, 1982) is a family drama about a married couple, Hasan and Nurlela, in their late 20s, with two children, living with their extended family in Jakarta in a lower-middle-class area in the large old house of the wife's widowed father. While Nurlela may seem to be advantaged by being surrounded by members of her own family, the balance of the marriage is impacted by Hasan's increasing dissatisfaction at the hectoring of his ageing father-in-law. Hasan's concerns impact on Nurlela in turn. As in earlier films, the male partner, played by Slamet Rahardjo, is shown to be more secretive, and, on occasions, less reliable than the female. The film uses a variation on Chekhovian naturalism. There are no melodramatic incidents or surprising coincidences in the film; and subtle ironies and parallels replace unexpected plot reversals. The surface naturalism creates a sense of a flow of life within the extended family environment of the house, and much of the dialogue seems inconsequential but is ultimately revealing. The performances by Christine and Slamet are amongst the most mature in any of Teguh's films. It was also the last time this pair starred in a film by Teguh, the two moving on independently into directing or producing their own films.

SECANGKIR KOPI PAHIT (Bitter Coffee, 1985) explores the drift to Jakarta of people from regional areas in Indonesia in search of a better life, and the consequences for them of attempting this migration. The film uses a complex flashback structure to explore the numerous relevant strands of its theme, the flashbacks being unmarked by dissolves, the transitions made only by direct cuts, producing a dynamically presented sense of different zones of time, space and memory. It is the most formally original of all of Teguh's films, and the film that most graphically presents the Third World dimensions of Indonesian society at the height of the Suharto period. The film centres on Togar, a Christian Batak from North Sumatra, who has been sent to Java as a teenager to study, and, having completed a university degree, finds work in Jakarta, firstly in a cement factory and then as a journalist. Later he marries a Christian woman from North Sulawesi, Lola, and adopts her three children. Lola runs a *warung* near the cement factory, and she

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befriends Togar, in his loneliness, shortly after he arrives in Jakarta. Togar investigates the case of the rape – by her employment agent – of a young woman, Sukarsih, also from a regional area, who is being brought to Jakarta, along with other young women from poor families in East Java, to work as a domestic servant. Togar's initial poor handling of this case leads to his temporary suspension from the newspaper.

The exceptional realism of Bitter Coffee, the way it presents the experience of poor migrants in the capital city, is a result of a number of choices: extensive location shooting in densely populated slum and industrial areas; the crowded flashback structure, that emulates the density of accumulated experience of its characters; and Togar's numerous still photos of the urban environment, montaged together at key points in the film. Togar is also a photo-journalist, so photo-journalism is an added dimension to the film. The brilliance and sheer pertinence of this film suggests that Teguh had long recognized the difficult conditions under which numerous people lived in Jakarta, and that it was important to show this on film. On its release, some members of the National Film Council felt that Bitter Coffee was an embarrassment to Indonesia and hoped it would not be shown abroad (Anwar 1985).

One critic has questioned why there are so few Chinese characters in Teguh's films (Sen 2006, pp. 171-172). There is no simple answer to that question. But while there are not many Chinese characters in Teguh's films, at least four of his films have Christians as main characters: Wajah Seorang Laki Laki, Ranjang Pengantin, Badai Pasti Berlalu and Secangkir Kopi Pahit (Soehadi 2015, pp. 315-316). There are also numerous connotations of Christianity in Ibunda. So Teguh was not afraid to present Christian characters and values in a country where 87 per cent of the population is at least nominally Muslim.

The third major film produced by Teguh in the 1980s, Ibunda (Mother, 1986), is a drama about an ageing widow's concerns about the behaviour of her now mostly adult children. But the film is also a political allegory. The younger daughter, a teenager, has a boyfriend from West Papua. The elder daughter is married to a Javanese businessman who objects to his young sister-in-law having an involvement with a Papuan. The film engages with the racism of middle-class Indonesians towards the people of West Papua (incorporated as a province into Indonesia in 1969). The younger son is involved in theatre. The topic of the play in which he is performing, an expressionist folk opera, is dictatorship and political oppression. While this may be taken by audiences as a critique of totalitarian communism, the imagery developed in the play might also be applied to contemporary Indonesia.

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IBUNDA is also a tribute to mothers, and to the potentials within maternal wisdom. So, the mother gently chides her children on their mistakes and provides alternative ways of addressing situations. Some might see this emphasis on the mother as in accord with the ideology of 'State Ibuism,' where women of the elite classes were honoured via women's associations, but also used to legitimize the state (Suryakusuma 1996). But the film in its concluding scene, where a family photograph is taken behind the front fence of the mother's old house (a front fence made, for want of better repair materials, of barbed wire), implies (for those who draw this conclusion) that Indonesians under the Suharto regime are not living in freedom.

The collapse of the Indonesian film industry in the late 1980s marked the end of Teguh's career as a director of films. Over the next ten years, until his stroke in May 1998, Teguh occasionally directed plays and television dramas, at the same time administering his Teater Populer workshop, which trained students from many parts of Indonesia. In 1993 the Teater Populer published a book as a tribute to Teguh, which includes many testimonies from his colleagues and students, and short statements by Teguh himself (Nano Riantiarno 1993).

Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya as Auteurs

Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya both made unique contributions as filmmakers to Indonesian cinema. Teguh Karya was an auteur in that he wrote and directed most of his films; few of his films were based on stories written by others. Nor, by and large, were they written by other members of his collective. In contrast, many of Sjuman Djaya's films were based on stories that originated elsewhere. In this sense Sjuman might be regarded as an exceptionally talented metteur en scène rather than an auteur. However, in Indonesia this distinction between Teguh as an auteur, and Sjuman as a metteur en scène, was never part of critical discourse. They were both seen as major imaginative talents. This is certainly due to the sheer brilliance of many of the films by Sjuman Djaya. The vision of the Betawi created in the Betawi films goes well beyond what one finds in Madjiondo's novel. In ATHEIS, the energy, insight, and intellectual pertinence, together with the use of humour as critique, results in Sjuman Djaya putting on screen aspects of Indonesia with a clarity rarely achieved by others. Sjuman Djaya might be considered as an auteur whose talent lay in his strong personal style, and the visions he could create.

As personalities these directors were different. Although assured as a director, Teguh was relatively self-effacing, kind, and practical, often

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thinking about how to realize the tasks in hand, including how he might deploy young people in his collective in his projects. As an auteur, Teguh believed that a filmmaker must be idealistic. He sometimes wrote newspaper articles arguing that a filmmaker must be aware of his responsibilities beyond that of making a commodity to be traded. He believed that films needed to have social relevance, but this could be achieved only if they had true insight, for such films could sharpen the people's perceptions (Teguh Karya 1989). Sjuman was charismatic, with strong convictions and a passionate personality, living life to its fullest. His nickname, from his teen years, was 'Manjoy' (Ardan 1985, p. 123). He once wrote a screenplay, in verse, for a film biography of the poet Chairil Anwar in a single sitting over a number of days (Sjuman Djaya 1987). If one asks how these directors became auteurs rather than simply servants of an industry, we should remember that Teguh had come to film from theatre, and his early formation had been based in acting in, and directing, great plays. In the case of Sjuman, he studied at the State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, where Tarkovsky had studied. Both directors had a breadth of experience and a sense of high standards not found in many of their contemporaries, except perhaps for Ami Priyono (who had also studied at the Institute of Cinematography in Moscow) and in Arifin C. Noer, who also came to cinema from theatre, although eventually Arifin came to make propaganda films for the Suharto government.

While Teguh's most important body of work was made from November 1828 onwards, in his collective from the late 1960s onwards Teguh was a mentor and a teacher, and numerous members of the collective subsequently made their names outside it. Actor Slamet Rahardjo became a writer-director and made experimental feature films, some critical of the government. Christine Hakim became a producer, as well as an actress. Actor Nano Riantiarno became Indonesia's foremost satirical playwright, founding the Teater Koma collective in 1977. Another actor, Henky Solaiman, later made a career as a film director. Both of the aforementioned are Chinese Indonesians. George Kamarullah, initially an actor, became an award-winning cinematographer and editor.

Sjuman's achievement lay primarily in the films he made and the inspiration he provided for later generations. This is seen in the continuing popularity of stories about the once marginalized Betawi, with Rano Karno producing the long-running television serial, Educated Doel, ten years after Sjuman's death. Second, there was also an incisive intellectual dimension to Sjuman's work, a preoccupation with ideas, as well as with life situations, as seen particularly in Raden Ajeng Kartini and in Atheis. Third, although it

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was difficult to get a film critical of the regime past the New Order censors, as we have seen there was a pattern of critique of the regime from early in Sjuman's career. Teguh, in contrast, was more cautious, and came to critique the regime later in his work, and even then, it was via veiled allegory, that was not always detected by those in power. Thus Ibunda, with its emphasis on the mother, did not upset the New Order establishment and went on to win numerous prizes at the Indonesian Film Festival in 1986. Nevertheless, there were some visions these two directors shared. As we have seen, some key films by both Sjuman and Teguh took up the cause of women's rights, women's equality and women's emancipation. Moreover, Teguh's Bitter Coffee and Sjuman's Sharp Gravel are the most sophisticated and devastating portraits ever made of problems facing the large masses of Indonesian rural and urban poor during the Suharto New Order period.

Films Written and Directed by Sjuman Djaya

Lewat Tengah Malam (Past Midnight). 1971.
Flamboyant. 1972.
Si Mamad. 1973.
Si Doel Anak Betawi (Si Doel, Child of the Betawi). 1973.
Atheis. 1974.
Laila Majenun. 1975.
Pinangan (A Proposal). 1976.
Si Doel Anak Modern (Si Doel, A Modern Lad). 1976.
Yang Muda, Yang Bercinta (Young, in Love). 1978. Screenplay also attributed to Umar Kayam.
Kabut Sutra Ungu (Mist of Purple Silk). 1980.
Bukan Sandiwara (Not a Play). 1981.
Raden Ajeng Kartini. 1982.
Budak Nafsu (Slave of Others' Lust, aka Fatima). 1983.
Kerikil Kerikil Tajam (Sharp Gravel). 1984.
Opera Jakarta. 1985.

Films Written and Directed by Teguh Karya

Wajah Seorang Laki-Laki (Face of a Man). 1971.
Cinta Pertama (First Love). 1973.
Ranjang Pengantin (The Marriage Bed). 1974.

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Kawin Lari (The Elopement). 1975.
Perkawinan Dalam Semusim (Marriage in a Season, or, A Short-lived Marriage). 1976.
Badai Pasti Berlalu (The Storm Will Pass). 1977.
November 1828. 1978.
Usia 18 (The Age of 18). 1980.
Dibalik Kelambu (Behind the Mosquito Net). 1982.
Secangkir Kopi Pahit (Bitter Coffee). 1984.
Doea Tanda Mata (Two Souvenirs, aka Mementos). 1984.
Ibunda (Mother). 1986.
Pacar Ketinggalan Kereta (The Lover Misses the Train). 1988.

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7 Hussain Haniff and the Place of the Auteur in Popular Malay Cinema

Jonathan Driskell

Abstract

This chapter re-examines ideas of authorship in the Malay cinema through a case study of one of its most prestigious filmmakers, Hussain Haniff. It considers the formation of Hussain's reputation by reviewing the changing critical attitudes to his work and discusses his films as instances of personal and political expression, but also as contributions to a popular entertainment industry. Hussain offered timely explorations of tradition, modernity and gender, and used the period's generic conventions and stars to shape his unique visions. By positioning Hussain within the broader world of film entertainment, this chapter contributes to a more historically grounded perspective on the role played by film directors during the golden age of Malay cinema.

Keywords: Hussain Haniff, authorship, Malay cinema, P. Ramlee

In histories of the 'golden age' of Malay cinema, which lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, Hussain Haniff[1] is often cast as the period's *second* most important filmmaker, after P. Ramlee, whose phenomenal popularity, both during his career and in the present day, makes him a largely uncontested figure at the top of the Malay filmmaking pantheon. Ramlee and Hussain worked for opposing studios in Singapore[2]: Malay Film Productions, which was owned by the Shaw Brothers and was where Ramlee worked before he moved to Merdeka Studios in Kuala Lumpur in 1964, and

1 In some sources 'Hussain' is spelt as 'Hussein,' 'Hussin' or even 'Husin.'

2 The Malay film industry was based in Singapore until the mid-1960s, when production began to shift to Merdeka Studios in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, following Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965.

Khoo, Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (eds), *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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Cathay-Keris, where Hussain spent his whole career. These were vertically integrated studios, complete with their own production facilities, including contracted personnel and stars, and their own distribution networks and cinema chains. The two studios also shaped the identities of the two directors, with Ramlee working for the more financially successful of the two, and thus adopting a more central place in the period's film culture, and Hussain belonging to the less prominent studio, which contributed to his adoption of an 'outsider' status. While the Malay cinema of the late 1940s to the early 1970s is viewed as a 'golden age' because of the high quality of films produced and the sheer volume of production (over 400 films were made), it was also a golden age in terms of cinema attendance, something both the Singaporean and Malaysian cinemas have struggled to attain ever since. According to Joel Kahn: 'It is [...] said that the film-going public in British Malaya was the highest per head in the world at that time, which also explains why Hollywood was eager to cultivate the Malayan film market' (Kahn 2006, p. 129). A glance at the surrounding film culture confirms this. The period's film magazines and newspaper articles about film show that this was a commercial cinema with mass appeal, centred on popular genres and stars.

In three books, *Latent Images* (Uhde and Uhde 2010), *Singapore Cinema* (Millet 2006) and *Malaysian Cinema in a Bottle* (Hassan Muthalib 2013), Ramlee's career is examined in detail, before moving on to a consideration of the cinema's other directors and, in particular, Hussain. The interest in Ramlee is understandable: he made some of the period's most famous films, including Penarek Becha (Trishaw Puller, P. Ramlee, 1955), Bujang Lapok (Worn out Bachelors, P. Ramlee, 1957) and Ibu Mertuaku (My Mother-in-law, P. Ramlee, 1962) and now has a pervasive presence in contemporary Malaysian society – he is regularly mentioned in the press, his songs are often played on the radio, and the road next to the Petronas Towers, the most iconic buildings in Malaysia, is even called Jalan P. Ramlee (P. Ramlee Road). Given this interest, he has, unsurprisingly, received considerable academic attention (Barnard and Barnard 2002; Van der Heide 2002; Adil Johan 2018). Why, though, is Hussain singled out as the *next* director worthy of attention?

This can partially be explained by the quality of Hussain's films, which brought him both commercial and critical success. His first two films, Hang Jebat (Hussain Haniff, 1961) and Dang Anom (Hussain Haniff, 1962), were box office hits, which afforded him the opportunity to make another ten films between 1962 and 1966. While his films were well-received during his lifetime, in the last couple of decades he has received something of a critical rediscovery. In 1994 Mansor Puteh wrote 'Hussain Haniff: Auteur

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with a Signature,' which argues that Hussain – not Ramlee – was the true auteur of Malay cinema, and in 1997 the Tenth Singapore International Film Festival screened two of his films as part of a retrospective on Cathay-Keris, the studio he worked for, with the programme describing him as Singapore's 'most critically acclaimed Malay director' (cited in Uhde and Uhde 2010, p. 231).

Hussain's apparent position as the second most important director of the Malay cinema also stems from parallels between him and Ramlee. On the one hand, the two filmmakers share similarities, most notably as they both belonged to the 'second generation' of filmmakers, made up of ethnically Malay directors (following the 'first generation,' which was largely composed of Indian directors who had been imported from the Bombay film industry, such as B.N. Rao, L. Krishnan and B.S. Rajhans). They both also died young – Ramlee in 1973 at the age of 44 and Hussain in 1966 at 32 – which has helped turn them into legendary figures.

On the other hand, Hussain also plays an important part in the Ramlee narrative because he was in many respects his opposite. This is apparent when we consider their different versions of the Hang Tuah story, a legend written in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, one of the most important texts in Malay historical literature, about a Malay warrior who lived in the Sultanate of Melaka in the fifteenth century. While Ramlee starred in a version that tells the story from the conventional perspective of the hero Hang Tuah, Hussain tells it from the point of view of the story's conventional antagonist, Hang Jebat, casting him instead as a conflicted anti-hero. Again, these versions position Ramlee as more conventional in contrast to Hussain as an outsider.

Underpinning this difference is a fundamental opposition between the ideas of 'art' and 'entertainment,' wherein Ramlee is often characterized as the *entertainer*, in part because he was not only a director, but also a musician and star, and Hussain, who worked solely behind the camera, as the *artist*. For Mansor Puteh (1994), who offers a rare attack against Ramlee's work, Ramlee was 'immensely popular with the masses,' but his films were just 'pure entertainment' and are, as such, significantly overrated. By contrast, on Hussain he writes: 'Hang Jebat became in a way, the first film produced in Singapore by a true auteur. And Hussain by making the film became not only a full-fledged director but also in the French New Wave concept a film auteur.' While Ramlee's persona contains a light-heartedness, stemming from his popular comedies and his charming demeanour (despite his involvement in some more serious dramatic films and the tragic circumstances surrounding his final years, when he lived in poverty and obscurity), Hussain's identity in contemporary accounts

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centres more on his serious approach to his craft. He was demanding and a perfectionist, who apparently waited several days for rainfall for a scene for Dua Pendekar (Two Warriors, Hussain Haniff, 1964) rather than use artificial rain (Mansor Puteh 1994) and was also known for having a bad temper on set. Moreover, he was an 'innovator' (Van der Heide 2002, p. 193), who offered a 'new style' (Hassan Muthalib 2013, p. 71), which departed from Malay cinema's Indian influences, and was the creator of socially and politically progressive cinema, especially through his 'anti-feudal' films, Hang Jebat and Dang Anom. That Hussain was a serious auteur is also conveyed through comparisons with other directors, with Mansor commenting on the similarities between him and Orson Welles – both were very young when they made their first films (Welles was 25 when he made Citizen Kane (1941) and Hussain was 27 when he made Hang Jebat) and both are well-known for their formal innovations.

While such parallels can help us understand the significance of Hussain, they downplay the fact that Ramlee was also an accomplished director, whose films contain stylistic complexity and didactic thematic content, and that Hussain was also contributing to the cinema as a commercial medium through the production of a string of popular hits. This chapter examines not only Hussain's significance as an 'auteur,' but also as a contributor to the period's popular cinema and in doing so I draw upon a few critical approaches. I use historical reception studies to uncover what Hussain represented within the Malay film culture of the 1960s, referring to popular film magazines, like *Majallah Filem* and *Berita Filem*, and the period's newspapers – *The Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*, in particular. I also examine how Hussain explores genre: while I draw on several of the 12 films he made between 1961 and 1966, I analyse two in particular: Hang Jebat as an example of a historical epic and Korban Kasih (Love Sacrifice, Hussain Haniff, 1962) as a contemporary drama (owing to the limitations of space, I do not discuss in detail the other main genre he worked in, which was comedy). In addition, I also explore how Hussain utilizes some of the period's top stars to both further his aesthetic agenda, while also offering the cinematic pleasures that audiences of the time would expect.

A Household Name: Hussain Haniff

Hussain was born in Pakistan, where his father came from, but moved to Singapore when he was very young. His father worked as a painter of backdrops for Bangsawan plays, a local form of Malay theatre, before getting

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a job at Malay Film Productions painting posters and adverts. While Hussain had initially wanted to be an actor (Uhde and Uhde 2010), he got his first film job working at Cathay-Keris initially as a negative cutter before being given the opportunity to edit one of their films. Impressed with his work, Cathay-Keris gave him a full-time position and he edited several films including Sumpah Pontianak (Curse of the Pontianak, B.N. Rao, 1958), Cinta Gadis Rimba (Love of a Forest Girl, L. Krishnan, 1958), and Noor Islam (K.M. Basker, 1960). This led to him being given a job as the director of Hang Jebat, which was based on a radio play called *Tragedi Hang Jebat* that had aired in 1958 and was written by Ali Aziz, with whom he collaborated on the screenplay.

To examine Hussain's significance to the Malay cinema, I will first explore how he was presented in extra-filmic materials, such as film posters, magazines and newspapers. If we turn to such materials, we can see that the directors of the Malay cinema often took a central place in the marketing of their films. This is most immediately evident in film posters, where the director's name was often on a par with or even more important than those of the film's stars (according to Jamil Sulong's memoirs (1990, p. 130), directors would often in fact get paid more than stars). The poster for Si Tanggang (Jamil Sulong, 1961) even included a photo of Jamil Sulong, the film's director, at the very centre of the image.[3] The importance of the director is also evident in the period's film magazines, such as *Majallah Filem*, a Shaw Brothers publication, which discussed the Malay cinema, while, primarily, marketing their products. Within its pages there are many articles devoted to their directors, who we often see on set in features that focus on their professional activities. They are also, however, treated as celebrities, often appearing in glossy, full-colour images – for instance, a photo of Jamil Sulong appears on page seventeen of the November 1962 issue, which shows him looking off camera into the distance and sporting a distinctly modern, intellectual look, consisting of a collared silk shirt, a metallic wrist watch, slicked back hair, and black thick-rimmed glasses. Articles also discuss directors' private lives. For instance, in one piece we are shown Omar Rojik's family life in photos depicting him at home with his wife and children (*Majallah Filem* 1963). This 'celebrification' of the studio's directors is unsurprising, given that this was a relatively small cinema, making it necessary for the studio to use all its resources as fully as possible.

Hussain was no exception and he played a big part in Cathay-Keris publicity. As Millet states: 'Hussein Haniff [...] became a household name

3 In *Majallah Filem* 15 (June 1961): 24-25.

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for a few years.' (Millet 2006, p. 51). His name appears prominently on film posters, especially after his big early successes, and he is discussed in countless magazine and newspaper articles. While these generally focus on his professional identity, discussing such topics as his latest films (*Berita Harian* 1961), his search for film locations (*Berita Harian* 1963a) and his move into making comedies (*Berita Harian* 1963d), there are also pieces on his private life. In *Berita Filem* an article discussed his wedding to film star Fatimah Ahmad (who appeared in seven of his films), which included images of the wedding celebrations and gave readers a 'behind the scenes' window into Hussain's life.

These extra-filmic discussions contain a few recurring themes. Firstly, we can see that the present-day emphasis on Hussain as a talented director was evident during the height of his career (though the term 'auteur,' which had only just been introduced to the cinema's critical vocabulary, is not used). *Berita Harian* (1962) commented: 'But MATA SHAITAN shows Hussain's strength in all aspects of storytelling – technical and directing – proof that the director has matured.'[4] The emphasis on Hussain as a perfectionist with a fiery temper was also established during this time (*Berita Harian* 1962): 'Sometimes to create the right feelings, Hussain would make an actor repeat her performance until the actor could be said to be tired by the level of perfection.'[5] It was even reported that Cathay-Keris arranged a meeting between Hussain and fellow filmmaker Aimi Jarr so that they could reconcile after a heated confrontation (*Berita Harian* 1963c).

These articles also reveal that even during his career Hussain was being compared to Ramlee, but also that it was Hussain who was often making these comparisons. In articles like 'Pengarah Hussain Haniff menjadi saingan P. Ramlee' (Director Hussain Haniff has become P. Ramlee's rival), Hussain comments on his desire to attain the same kind of success as Ramlee. On the one hand, this is defined as professional accomplishments. For example, there is a discussion about Hussain's attempts to win an award at the Asia Film Festival, where Ramlee had already achieved considerable success (*Berita Harian* 1963a) – by 1963 he had won five awards and would go on to win another one in 1964. While Hussain was nominated for an Asia Film Festival award for HANG JEBAT, he would never win one. However,

4 'Tetapi "Mata Shaitan" menggambarkan kekuatan Hussain dalam segala segi cherita – teknik dan pengarah lakunan – inilah bukti-nya bila sa-orang pengarah telah dewasa.'

5 'Kadang kali untok mewujudkan suatu penggambaran perasaan, sa-orang pelakun itu di-suroh Hussain berpuloh kali mengulang lakunan-nya sa-hingga pelakun itu boleh di-katakan leteh sampai pada peringkat kesempurnaan.'

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according to Hussain, box office success was more important (*Berita Harian* 1963a): 'Because even if the films don't win "Oscars," it is likely that the film will make progress and do well here at the Malay film box office.'[6] The importance of popularity and *fame* itself are also stated elsewhere by Hussain (*Berita Harian* 1963b): 'I will try my hardest starting from today so that one day in the future I can become as popular and famous as P. Ramlee.'[7]

Historical Epic: Hang Jebat

Of all Hussain's films Hang Jebat has received the most academic interest (Van der Heide 2002; Chung 2012). It is noted for its formal approach and politics, as well as for how Hussain and Ali Aziz offer an unconventional take on the famous Hang Tuah story. The 1956 version, which starred Ramlee, follows the standard story: Tuah leaves Melaka after he is framed for treason by jealous court officials. Shocked at the injustice, his childhood friend Hang Jebat overthrows the sultan and installs himself in the palace. When the sultan discovers that Tuah is still alive, he requests his help in removing Jebat. Tuah returns and after a long duel kills Jebat, returning the sultan to the throne. While the 1956 version positions Tuah as the hero, the Hussain version tells the story from Jebat's perspective, with him being presented in a more sympathetic light.

Hang Jebat has received praise for the intricacies of its formal approach, wherein Hussain adopts a personal, innovative style, which utilizes unconventional camera positions and movements. For example, when Jebat, having overthrown the sultan, is being entertained by dancers in the palace's throne room, Hussain cuts to show the dance from above, in a manner reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley musical number, which captures the symmetrical patterns and movements of the dance. The film has also been discussed in terms of its 'realism,' with Van der Heide (2002) and Norman Yusoff (2007) both commenting on how Hussain creates a form of psychological realism uncommon in Malay films of the period: the narration is omniscient, giving us knowledge that Jebat does not possess,

6 'Kerana walau pun filem2 tersebut tidak berjaya merebut sa-barang 'oscar,' namun ada kemungkinan filem itu akan menchapai kemajuan dan sambutan lain dari segi 'box office' dari perminat2 filem Melayu di-sini.'

7 'Saya akan berusha mulai hari ini dengan sa-boleh2-nya supaya pada suatu masa nanti saya menjadi popular dan terkenal saperti P. Ramlee.'

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such as when the sultan asks Tuah to return, but for large portions of the film we have the same range and depth of knowledge as Jebat and are given insight into the workings of his mind through numerous close-ups and monologues in which he lays out his views. Moreover, the film's mise en scène draws on the conventions of realism, particularly through its use of location shooting, an aspect of the film that was discussed at the time (*The Straits Times* 1962b).

In shifting the focus from Tuah to Jebat, the film challenges the politics underpinning the standard version of the tale, which has generally been seen as an endorsement of feudalism or, more generally, of the Malay elites. Shaharuddin Maaruf (2014) argues that Tuah is valorized as the ultimate Malay hero in order to uphold unquestioning loyalty to Malay rulers, of past and present. Telling this story from Jebat's point of view subverts or at the very least problematizes this message, with writers such as Hassan Muthalib (2013, p. 75) describing the film as 'socialist,' given Jebat's loyalty to his friend Tuah and 'the people' more generally, rather than the sultan, a point that is underscored by speeches that advance his egalitarian agenda: 'Don't bow to me, I don't want to be worshipped. [...] I'm Jebat, one of the people. [...] I'm willing to die for the people, because I want justice, justice, justice!'

However, as Van der Heide comments, this perspective is undermined through contradictions in his behaviour. Although he claims to be uninterested in becoming the sultan, he soon engages in the same pleasures and activities: he lounges in his throne room, feasting on the sultan's food, and in one scene we see him lying in bed with the sultan's concubines, which has a sexual frankness not usually shown in the Malay cinema, but which would become a common part of Hussain's films – Jiran Sekampung (Neighbours, Hussain Haniff, 1965) begins with a woman swimming naked in a river and Cinta Kasih Sayang (Love, Hussain Haniff, 1965) deals with the theme of adultery in a morally complex way (Amir Muhammad 2010, pp. 313-314). The idea that Hang Jebat is a socialist film is also potentially undermined when Jebat, who had previously spoken out in favour of the masses, runs amok, killing several people. As Van der Heide (2002) persuasively argues, while Jebat is initially presented as an identification figure, he becomes more distant as his behaviour becomes erratic and unreasonable, while the sultan, in his attempts to re-establish order, becomes a more sympathetic character. From this perspective, we can view Jebat and the explosive violence that he embodies as more than just an expression of Hussain's authorial themes, but also as a symptom of the period's violence and anger – the film was released during a turbulent period that had recently witnessed a World War, a long period of British colonization, labour disputes and strikes in the

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mid-1950s, which involved the film industry,[8] and a twelve-year-long civil war – known as The Emergency – between the British and the Malayan Communist Party.

The film's political significance also stems from its generic identity, as a historical epic – one of the oldest and most popular genres during the golden age of Malay cinema. These films were initially based on classical texts, such as Leila Majnun (B.S. Rajhans, 1934), which was one of the first Malay-language movies to be made. Later, however, filmmakers increasingly set their stories during precolonial Malay history, with famous examples including Semerah Padi (P. Ramlee, 1956), Isi Neraka (Jamil Sulong, 1960), and Raja Bersiong (Jamil Sulong, 1968). Hang Jebat is a clear example of this genre. On the one hand, it contains the melodramatic elements common in these films through its emphasis on themes of morality and intergenerational conflict, evident in the antagonism between Jebat and the sultan, as well as through the extreme emotions and sensations it represents, many of which are externalized through the mise en scène. An article in *The Straits Times* comments on a scene in which the sea hit the shore, while Jebat is shot from below, giving insight into Jebat's unsettled feelings following his friend's expulsion from Melaka (*The Straits Times* 1962b). At the same time, the film uses the historical setting to create spectacle, a common feature of Hussain's films. This is achieved through the large sets and many actors used, but also through how Hussain uses the camera: the mobile frame is utilized to show the full scale of his sets, especially in shots that take us from one part of the palace to another all in one take; they also create an 'open' aesthetic, stressing the existence of a continuous world beyond the confines of the frame. Similarly, Hussain uses a shot that would frequently recur in his films, shooting characters from below with the empty sky as the background. We see this in the scene mentioned in the article in *The Straits Times* as well as at the beginning of the film when Jebat talks to Tuah following the latter's expulsion from Melaka, both of which are images that connect Jebat with the expansive and open space of the sky, further adding to the film's sense of scale. Moreover, the film's spectacle is also based on the abundance and sheer opulence of the mise en scène, evident in the period costumes, the elaborately decorated sets, such as the sultan's throne room, and the many props, including Tuah's magic keris (a Malay dagger with a wavy blade), which he uses to kill Jebat.

The film's generic identity is also enhanced by its stars, who are central to its popular appeal, especially Nordin Ahmad who plays Jebat. Through his animated and charismatic performance, he brings star quality to a

8 See Barnard (2006) for a discussion of the strike movement's impact on the cinema.

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character who is himself a star of sorts, owing to his fame and popularity with the ordinary people (at least to begin with), which comes not only from him overthrowing the sultan, but also from how he plays to the crowd in the throne room with the dais becoming a makeshift stage for his energetic performances. Nordin had already appeared in many films for Malay Film Productions, where he worked from 1951 to 1958, before moving to Cathay-Keris, and had starred alongside Ramlee in Hang Tuah (Phani Majumdar, 1956) (as Hang Kasturi, not Jebat), Anakku Sazali (Phani Majumdar, 1956) and Semerah Padi, amongst others. His portrayal of Jebat plays an important role in shaping the film's meanings and gives further insight into Hussain's authorship, especially through the aggression he brings to the role through his embodiment of a youthful, angry masculinity that would be common in Hussain's cinema – he moves around the set with boundless energy, the camera constantly moving to catch up with him, sometimes towering above it, and he cuts down his enemies with a violence that made Hussain's films distinct from many of the period's films.

Hang Jebat's use of genre and stardom was central to its politics as well as its popular appeal.[9] As critics of the time observed, Hussain used his historical subject matter to comment on contemporary issues such as feudalism, even if the film's perspective on these issues is not entirely clear-cut. Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006) has shown that different versions of the Hang Tuah story correspond with changes in Malayan/Malaysian society and politics. In relation to the period under question, she notes the importance of Kassim Ahmad, whose thesis in 1959 presented Jebat as the greater hero, making it representative of the years after independence as well as being an important precursor to Hussain's work. For Chung, too, the film's conflicted representation of anti-feudalism made it a timely take on the Hang Tuah tale, in terms of how it contributed to shifting discourses on nationalism during the period of decolonization. Malaya had gained independence from the British in 1957, with Singapore following in 1963, first as a part of Malaysia and then as an independent nation in 1965. While the more conservative Hang Tuah represents 'Malaya's progress to national independence orchestrated to preserve British interests,' Hang Jebat tentatively articulates 'a growing intellectual awareness of expressing individual rights' (Chung 2012, p. 142). On the one hand, then, Hang Jebat was defined by its modernity. It offered a modern take on the Hang Tuah tale, which was told through innovative techniques and an emphasis on a highly cinematic form of spectacle. At the

9 According to Barnard (2002): 'Tom Hodge reported that the film made $145,377, an amazing amount for the time.'

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same time, through its spectacle, abundance and emphasis on Malay heroes of the past, HANG JEBAT offers a nostalgic vision of a 'golden age' of Malay history – a time before colonization and the complications of modernity and decolonization.

Hussain went on to make more historical epics and occupied a more central place in his films' marketing. The advert in *The Straits Times* (1962a) for his next film, DANG ANOM, stated: 'Hussain Haniff the director who gave you "HANG JEBAT" now brings to the screen another MASTERPIECE!' DANG ANOM capitalized on features that had made HANG JEBAT such a big hit with audiences through its emphasis on anti-feudal rhetoric and spectacle. He then made MATA SHAITAN (Hussain Haniff, 1962), another historical film, before changing course with KORBAN KASIH.

Contemporary Drama: KORBAN KASIH

In discussions of Hussain's work there is often a strong emphasis on his contributions to the historical epic: 'Instead of contemporary subjects, Hussain worked with historical stories, setting his social commentary and criticisms in Malaya's feudal past' (Timothy White, cited in Uhde and Uhde 2010, p. 42). However, from KORBAN KASIH (Love Sacrifice) onwards he also made contemporary dramas, including JIRAN SEKAMPUNG and CINTA KASIH SAYANG, and comedies, such as MABUK KEPAYANG (Head over Heels in Love, Hussain Haniff, 1962), MASUK ANGIN KELUAR ASAP (Futile, Hussain Haniff, 1963) and GILA TALAK (Hankering for the Ex, Hussain Haniff, 1963). This move makes sense in terms of the period's commercial demands. While contemporary dramas and comedies were popular, they were also generally cheaper to make than historical epics as they did not require the same costly sets and costumes. At the same time, this can also be understood in relation to his rivalry with Ramlee, who excelled in making a wide range of genres. One of the main aspects of Ramlee's identity during his career was indeed his versatility: he took several different roles in the filmmaking process, including writer, director, actor, musician and composer; he worked in all the period's main genres (historical, contemporary, comedy, horror); he even won an award at the Asian Film Festival in 1963 as 'Most Versatile Talent' for IBU MERTUAKU. Hussain commented on Ramlee's versatility in *Berita Harian* (1963b), stating: 'I will try starting from today to match P. Ramlee.'[10] This began with his first departure from the historical epic with KORBAN KASIH.

10 'Saya akan berusaha mulai dari hari ini untok menandingi P. Ramlee.'

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The film, set mostly in Singapore, follows Iskandar (Yusoff Latiff), who is involved in a plane crash and is presumed dead by his father (Yem Jaafar) and girlfriend, Marhani (Fatimah Ahmad). Following a grief-induced nervous breakdown, the distraught father hires a nurse, who happens to be Marhani, to help him recover. The two characters have never previously met and do not know they have a shared connection with Iskandar. Upon seeing how well Marhani takes care of him and his two other children (who are both significantly younger than Iskandar), he asks her to marry him and she accepts. Following their wedding, Iskandar, who has survived and has been nursed back to health by some villagers on a remote island, returns to Singapore and discovers that his girlfriend is now his stepmother.

From the very beginning, the film draws upon the familiar conventions of the contemporary drama. The opening music, for example, shifts between two themes – one foreboding and tragic, the other lighter and more comical – capturing the two registers commonly found in the genre. Rather like Ramlee's Ibu Mertuaku, a key example of this type of film, which deals with the manipulation of a famous musician, Kassim Selamat (Ramlee), by his deceitful mother-in-law (Mak Dara), the film begins with moments of comedy, particularly through scenes depicting Iskandar's precocious younger brother. However, as the film becomes more sombre, following Iskandar's disappearance and then return, it goes through a series of revelations (first Iskandar learns that Marhani is married, then that she is married to his father) and moments of heightened, melodramatic expression, which are created through Yusoff, Fatimah and Yem's performances, as well as through Hussain's staging. The early scenes would generally depict characters in the frame together, facing each other, but here he uses the more confined spaces of the family home where most of the action takes place to create claustrophobia and division – as the situation deteriorates characters are framed with their backs to each other or are placed on separate planes of action.

In keeping with the genre of contemporary drama is an emphasis on the details of the modern world, which is evident from the beginning of the film when Iskandar goes to visit his friend in hospital (and see Marhani, who is working as a nurse there). He leaves his modern, detached house, puts on his sunglasses, gets in his open-top sports car and drives to the hospital; the jazz music on the soundtrack is upbeat, and the quick cutting of the shots matches the speed of the car and the youthful energy of Latiff's performance. With its cars, jazz and modernity, and its depictions of youthful angst and intergenerational conflict, the film also evokes the Hollywood teen pictures of the 1950s, such as Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray, 1955), a film that was popular in Singapore and Malaya as with elsewhere.

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We would have similar displays of the modern world in Ramlee's films, in narratives that explore tensions between traditional and modern Malay identity, and several essays have questioned what Ramlee's perspective on these tensions was (e.g. Barnard and Barnard 2002; Barnard 2005), with a range of answers emerging: in some cases Ramlee is critical of Malay society's attachment to its traditions; in others, there is concern and disillusionment about some of the rapid changes society was experiencing at this time (for analysis of the relationship between tradition and modernity in the Indonesian context, see Hanan and Soehadi's discussion of Sjuman Djaya [this volume, Chapter 6]).

Hussain's film, however, is more resolutely modern in its outlook, with the few representatives of Malay tradition being presented in a more negative light. When Iskandar cannot be with Marhani, he settles for Rokiah, but even then, he retains a distance from her as he is still pining for Marhani. Spurred on by her friend (Siput Sarawak), who comes from the traditional *kampung* (village) and is presented as a promiscuous and scheming character, Rokiah visits a *bomoh* (a traditional Malay shaman) to seek his assistance in resolving her love life. In the first shot of the *bomoh* he is juxtaposed with a human skull, hinting that he will play a sinister role in the film's development: he casts a spell to get Marhani out of the way – at the film's conclusion she dies, and it is hinted that the *bomoh*'s spell is the cause of this.

In contrast, Marhani is a modern, working-class woman, who is idealized throughout. Her working-class job and origins present her as ordinary, as does her name, which Amir Muhammed (2010, p. 234) points out suggests *marhaen* (peasant). Her modernity is conveyed in a few ways: she works as a nurse, at one point, drives Iskandar's car and, most importantly, is glamorous and stylish, often being captured in close-ups and wearing a range of different kebayas. Her idealization is most evident in scenes that show her care, patience and maternal skills, such as when she looks after Iskandar's young brother and sister, whose behaviour improves through her positive influence. In one scene she takes them to a playground and as she stands at the top of the slide, she is shot against the sky, an image reminiscent of the images of Jebat in HANG JEBAT, but which also showcases her glamour by abstracting her from her surroundings and emphasizing more fully her stylish kebaya and carefully composed beauty. The way Fatimah Ahmed is used in the film encapsulates how female stars were presented in Malay culture of the period, found in films and the period's fan magazines like *Majallah Filem*, where values relating to family and motherhood were combined with style and glamour to create popular versions of Malay female modernity.

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While Hussain's move into contemporary drama represented a break from his work in historical drama, it also contains clear continuities. Korban Kasih takes place on a smaller scale than Hang Jebat, but as we have already seen contains trademark shots, such as filming his protagonists from below, against the sky. There is also plenty of location shooting, depicting Singapore's coastline, which Iskandar drives around and where he courts Marhani in the film's early scenes. However, one of Korban Kasih's main continuities with the earlier film is that it offers another representation of youthful, angry masculinity. While the women in Hussain's films tend to be submissive, like Marhani, or promiscuous and scheming, such as Siput Sarawak's character, the male protagonists are often filled with aggression, rather like Hussain himself – if the newspaper reports about his on-set confrontations are to be believed. Following Iskandar's discovery that his father has married his girlfriend, he goes on a drinking spree, depicted through a montage sequence that shows him in a string of shadowy bars downing drinks, juxtaposed with flashing neon signs for various types of beer and liquor. Upon returning home he enters into a rage, smashing decorations and waking Marhani. In both Hang Jebat and Korban Kasih, then, we are presented with flawed, tragic male heroes, who while ending the films as failures, are ultimately presented in a sympathetic light: they are emotionally complex and possess the 'masculine' values of strength and aggression.

Conclusion

In many respects, Hussain Haniff is an auteur in the conventional sense, whose films contain formal and thematic continuities that unify his body of work, even across the different genres he worked in. His style of filmmaking drew on realism, dealt with political allegories and images of angry young men and was generally harsher and more caustic than that of many of his contemporaries, such as Ramlee. At the same time, Hussain's importance as a director stems not only from his auteur credentials, but also from making commercial films and being versatile when it came to genre, both of which help to account for his popularity with audiences at the time. While his position as the top director at Cathay-Keris was in part because he was an innovator, which served them well as a studio that needed to carve out its own distinct place in the period's Malay film culture, it was ultimately because his films made money for them. As Hang Jebat and Korban Kasih show, he knew how to work within the

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conventions of a range of genres and was adept at utilizing the talents and personas of the stars who worked for him. Moreover, we can see that within this context one of the most important assets a director could possess was versatility, given that the studios were relatively small and with limited personnel – it was important for directors to be able to cater to a wide range of audience tastes. Hussain demonstrates this versatility through his work in historical epics and contemporary dramas, while also using these different genres to channel his style and themes in novel directions.

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8 Ratana Pestonji and Santi Vina

Exploring the 'Master' of Thai Cinema during Thailand's 'American Era'

Mary J. Ainslie

Abstract

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in and recognition of post-World War II Thai filmmaker Ratana Pestonji (1908-1970), who often takes pride of place in narratives of Thai film history as a rare early Thai auteur untouched by the trappings of commercial filmmaking and bravely fighting against the monopolizing Hollywood system. This chapter seeks to clarify Pestonji's activities during the crucial and politically complex 1950s post-war period. Drawing largely upon historical sources and accounts from America, the chapter highlights Pestonji's close relationship with Hollywood filmmakers based in Thailand, suggesting that Pestonji's history and relationship with Hollywood studios in the early 1950s could potentially undermine posthumous nationalist constructions of this filmmaker.

Keywords: 1950s, Thailand, Ratana Pestonji, America, Santi Vina

To scholars of Thai film history, director Ratana Pestonji (1908-1970) needs little introduction. Born on 22 May 1908 at Rongmeung Road, Bangkok, Thailand, Ratana[1] was of South Asian origin and spent time studying in both India and the UK. Exhibiting a strong interest and talent for photography and filmmaking from an early age, Ratana graduated from the UK in 1932 with a degree in mechanical engineering and continued to enter and win

1 This chapter follows local Thai conventions in referring to Thai authors, filmmakers and academics by the first name. In all cases, surnames are used for in-text citations and references to avoid unnecessary confusion for non-Thai readers.

Khoo, Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (eds), *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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amateur photography competitions throughout his studies. Returning to Thailand in the late 1930s, Ratana then further explored his interest in filmmaking by taking photographs and recording short film reels in Thailand during World War II, later collecting an award for his short film Tang[2] (Pestonji, 1937) at a film festival in Glasgow, resulting in a now-infamous picture of him receiving the prize from Alfred Hitchcock in 1937. History then records his 'big break' as cinematographer for director Prince Bhanu Yugala, a keen pre-World War II filmmaker who founded the production company Thai Film Company. Ratana eventually branched out alone, founding the Far East Film Company Ltd around early 1953 and making a small number of highly lauded films throughout the 1950s and 1960s before his death in 1970.

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in and recognition of Ratana's films, much of which was spurred on by the discovery of Ratana's 'lost' 1953 Thai film Santi Vina (Thavi Na Bangchang, 1954) in 2014. However, as outlined in the introduction to this section of the book, such a move is also part of a more general global trend to learn more about the history of smaller national film industries in Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular. Indeed, this section of this book reflects the increased contemporary interest in and international recognition of Southeast Asian film auteurs active in the Cold War period, an era when the substantial growth of film industries in major Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand gave rise to the figures such as P. Ramlee, Hussain Haniff, Mike de Leon, Teguh Karya, Sjuman Djaya, Usmar Ismail and Ratana himself. Indeed, Ratana stands out as the sole Thai auteur amongst this selection, and the recognition of his contribution to Thai film history and development is correspondingly substantial, both within and outside of Thailand.

The Thai Film Archives and museum in the outskirts of Bangkok includes a significant amount of historical information and memorabilia about Ratana and his films, as well as a life-size model of Ratana filming. Film historian and archivist Chalida Uabumrungjit describes Ratana as playing an absolutely crucial role in the history and development of Thai cinema, despite his having made very few actual films in his lifetime (Uabumrungjit 2003). Ratana received a lifetime achievement award from the Bangkok

2 Thai titles and names often follow multiple spellings, resulting in the same films and filmmakers being referenced under multiple titles and names, including Ratana himself. Where possible, film titles in this chapter (as well as any other terms in the Thai language) have been transliterated in accordance with the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) as the most accepted system of transliteration, in order to standardize spelling.

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International Film Festival in 2004, while selections of his films have been screened at the Tenth Busan International Film Festival as part of a programme titled 'Remapping Asian Auteur Cinema,' with the restored SANTI VINA also screening at the Cannes Film Festival Classics Section in 2016.

The significant contemporary interest in Ratana speaks of a need to reclaim an alternative and artistic thread in Thai film history, one besides that of mass produced post-war commercial Thai productions which, despite their innovation, bear the (unfair) stigma of Thai lower-class preferences. Indeed, referred to by various online bloggers, researchers and cinephiles as the 'father' of Thai film, the 'pioneer' of Thai cinema and even 'the man who died for his art,' Ratana, for many, remains symbolic of all that is wrong with Thai cinema's ongoing difficult relationship with the Thai state. For filmmakers and cinephiles who lament the lack of official support for local filmmaking and the overwhelming presence of foreign films in the country, Ratana takes pride of place in Thai film history as a rare early Thai auteur and one untouched by the trappings of commercial filmmaking, instead bravely fighting against the hegemonic and monopolizing imperialist Hollywood system. Most significantly, Ratana's untimely death in 1970 is often attributed to such pressure and, perhaps fittingly, his fatal heart attack occurred during a speech given to Thai government officials about the need for more support for Thai filmmaking, so constructing Ratana forevermore as a tragic artist who made the ultimate sacrifice for his work.

Certainly, Ratana attempted to improve Thai film through pushing for governmental support and technically modernizing the medium through, among other actions, founding one of the few 35mm production companies after the war and competing artistically on the international stage. At great financial cost to himself, Ratana partly succeeded in the latter, with at least two of his films shown at festivals abroad: SANTI VINA competed at the first Southeast Asian Film Festival in 1954, while PHRAE DAM (Black Silk, 1961) was screened at the 1961 Berlin International Film Festival.

Yet given Ratana's hugely symbolic status in Thai film history, it can be difficult to separate the man from the mythology and to identify Ratana's concrete activities as a filmmaker in Thailand during the post-World War II period. This chapter seeks to clarify some of Ratana's activities during the crucial 1950s post-war period as well as shed light upon the general complex situation of filmmaking in Thailand at this time. In a similar way to the difficult position of the Indonesian, Malaysian and Philippine directors explored in this section of the book, Ratana's relationship to the state and foreign powers was also (necessarily) multifaceted. While it is during the

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1950s that Ratana's work becomes particularly significant in the history of Thai film, available evidence in the form of contemporary Thai and 1950s American sources as well as American political memoirs about Southeast Asia suggests that Ratana's history and relationship with Hollywood studios in the early 1950s could potentially undermine posthumous nationalistic constructions of this filmmaker.

Post-war Thai Filmmaking and Hollywood

Before the 1950s, Thai filmmaking followed a development trajectory similar to that of other smaller national film industries around the globe, with few indigenous productions and the market heavily dominated by imported Hollywood productions. The *International Motion Picture Almanac*, reporting on Thailand in the late 1930s, notes that 'Pictures from America have 95 percent of the market' (quoted in Boonyaketmala 1992, p. 67), while alongside this, from 1927 to 1945, indigenous Thai productions comprised only 64 feature films 'an average of fewer than four titles per year' (Boonyaketmala 1992, p. 650). Such reports may seem bleak but are not so unusual in smaller national film industries during this early period, particularly in Southeast Asia. Indeed, in Thailand, Malaya, Singapore and Vietnam, indigenous filmmaking generally did not become a recognizable and financially viable industry until after World War II, when output also increased substantially.

Instead, as an easily accessible mass entertainment form imported films were evidently popular in Thailand and, instead of filmmaking, Thai entrepreneurs quickly invested in exhibition as the most profitable element of this new industry. This ensured that a network of both formal and informal cinemas grew across the nation from an early period (Kongkananda [1975], cited in Hamilton 1994; Boonyaketmala 1992, p. 65). Nang Sao Suwan (Miss Suwanna of Siam, Henry MacRae, 1923) (considered by most to be the first Thai production, though actually directed by an American) was the first feature film made and shot exclusively in Thailand, with Chok Song Chan (Double Luck, Kun Anurakrathakarn, 1927) following a few years later.

Thai filmmaking then continued to develop, with the majority of productions made in silent 16mm film stock, with the exception of a handful of nationalistic propaganda films produced and funded by the constitutional government and Pridi Bhanomyong's famous plea for Thai neutrality during times of war, the 35mm 1940 adaption of Phrachao Changphueak (The King of the White Elephant, Sunh Vasudhara, 1940).

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However, the outbreak of World War II caused significant disruption to film production and networks across Southeast Asia. The Malayan and Indonesian industries were co-opted by occupying Japanese authorities for propaganda purposes and even functioned as a production base and setting for Japanese films. In Thailand, the brief Japanese occupation severely damaged the supply of Hollywood imports upon which the large network of existing cinemas relied, likewise putting an end to fledgling Thai production companies that had switched to making more expensive 35mm synchronized-sound productions before the war. Such companies were forced to close due to the halted supply of imported film stock (Sukwong 2001) and the chemical solutions needed to produce film (Udomdet 1990, p. 57). Yet while a 35mm film industry would be expected to resume after the war, in the aftermath of such disruption the few Thai sound studios were unable to recover, and instead 35mm film stock with synchronized sound was not standardized in Thai filmmaking until after the 1960s.

Rather than decline in the 1950s, however, Thai filmmaking instead increased dramatically, as smaller film companies and independent producers who had not been able to afford the technology involved in the switch to sound and had continued to work in silent 16mm dubbed film, were able to survive through using this cheaper film stock available during and immediately following World War II (Sukwong 2001, p. 12). Spurred on by the success of the 16mm production Supab Burut Suatai (Thai Gentleman Bandit, M.C. Sukrawandit Ditsakul and Tae Prakartwutisan, 1949), Thai entrepreneurs and businessmen began to finance cheap 16mm live-dubbed colour productions of popular cinema. Despite the technological setback, therefore, Thai filmmaking actually increased from 10 per year in the immediate aftermath of World War II to around 50 in 1956 (Udomdet 1990, p. 57). These 16mm Thai productions targeted upcountry rural audiences, many of which were reached by travelling cinemas. Such technology was easy to use and transport and also cheap to develop (previously 35mm film often had to be sent abroad for development, a lengthy and expensive process). Harkening back to indigenous forms of entertainment, characters were live dubbed by a male and a female narrator in cinemas, with dubbers often adding to the entertainment by embellishing the production with their own creative commentary and local colloquialisms. Stock narratives, generically blended sequences and staple film stars used again and again led to an easily bankable product in an otherwise financially high-risk industry.

Meanwhile, Hollywood expansion into East and Southeast Asia was a key US goal of the immediate post-World War II climate, and Thailand's more affluent urban-based audiences enjoyed expensive Hollywood productions

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shown in large and lavish US-funded cinemas. In the 1950s, all the major Hollywood studios set up representative offices in Bangkok, including Colombia Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, United Artists, Universal Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, and Walt Disney Productions (UNESCO 1982, p. 40). A UNESCO report indicates that these were by far the best organized group of foreign film importers in the country, with few equal competitors. Indeed, the influx of Hollywood films was rapid, and, in 1954, of the principle distribution companies in Thailand, 86.8 per cent were American (Panyarachun 1954, p. 57). That year the number of feature-length and short foreign pictures shown totalled 1858 while domestic production stood at 127 (a mixture of features and shorts), all of which were in 16mm (ibid.).

American studios funded thousand-seat cinemas such as the Broadway and the Krung Kasem Theatre, both in central Bangkok and all equipped with air conditioning.[3] American money led to a general increase in the number of cinemas as well as an upgrading of facilities. Hollywood publicity campaigns in Thailand (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia) were significant and successful, involving expensive promotions in the form of 3D displays, banners and sound trucks subsidized by the studios, reflecting the importance of overseas markets to an industry that was no longer recouping costs domestically. Indeed, Hollywood productions were becoming increasingly lavish and expensive and had to rely upon overseas revenue. The president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Eric A. Johnston, founded the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) in 1946 as 'a distributing agency for the major companies during the post-war period of confusion and economic dislocation' (Jones 1957, p. 369). One message from Johnston in an issue of the *Far East Film News* in 1954 reads, 'Since three out of every four American films do not earn their costs in the American market alone, we must have foreign markets. I am fighting day after day to constantly increase this market and add to revenue return to Hollywood' (Johnston 1954, p. 21).

This significant Hollywood presence during the 1950s and 1960s was also part of a wider vast influx of American culture into Thailand as part of a cultural, economic and political alliance cultivated by and mutually beneficial to US and Thai authorities. The 1950s in particular was a key period of development for Thai politics, both nationally and internationally. In 1949 Thailand allied itself strongly with US interests, a position that

3 The Cathay Cinema also opened in 1958, screening Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese productions.

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was to shape the direction of Thai politics and culture for the next two decades. The propinquity of Thai and American government interests resulted in close cooperation against the communist threat in Southeast Asia, and indeed Thai government actions reveal this as a common goal. The authoritarian and nationalistic Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun) orientated Thai interests towards those of the United States, and Thailand became a close US ally in the ongoing fight against communist influences in the region.

Southeast Asia had become more significant to US overseas interests after the advancement of communist forces on several fronts in Asia in the early 1950s during and after the Korean War. Such interests involved exercising power and influence in countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines largely through supporting authoritarian regimes. In Thailand, US political investment increased dramatically and quickly, and by 1954 the United States was committed to defending Thailand's security with the entire American strategy based in the country. This partnership was heavily military and relied upon changes in Thai internal politics that had become increasingly repressive and anti-communist under Phibun. The Thai government sought to counter the encroachment of communist ideology after World War II by positioning it as a dangerous external 'other' in direct opposition to the familiar unified 'Thainess,' a nationalist notion promoted with vehemence (Winichakul 1994, p. 170). The Thai Anti-communist Act of 1952 even emphasized that 'communism is un-Thai in its ideas and as a way of life' and was based upon un-American activities legislation in the United States (Winichakul 1994, p. 6). Around 40,000 American troops were eventually stationed in Thailand throughout the 1960s, a period scholars label as the 'American era' due to the very significant changes that transformed the physical and cultural landscape of the country (Ruth 2011). In particular, this included the building of roads and general infrastructure that began to change the relationship between urban and rural Thailand, as well as the influx of American popular culture that also challenged social norms, evident in the themes and mise en scène of 1960s Thai films.

Throughout this period, Hollywood studios kept a close eye on the indigenous Thai film industry, to the extent that American sources can often tell us more about the history of Thai cinema than many incomplete Thai records. Hollywood reports from the time emphasize how malleable and profitable the country was to Hollywood/American overseas interests, providing information as to the state of Hollywood in Thailand and Thai filmmaking. In particular, reports continually highlight how the indigenous Thai film industry posed no threat to Hollywood interests, as the stark

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cultural, economic and geographical gulf between the urban and rural audiences, as well as the very different thematic and technological nature of the films themselves, ensured that indigenous and foreign productions largely did not compete for revenue or overlap in any way. For instance, a 1953 report in the Hollywood publication *Rengo Film News* states there are 120 cinemas in Thailand, of which 100 are capable of projecting 35mm films. The article also outlines the difference between local production, stating this to be all in 16mm with around a dozen per year produced, and foreign American imports, which stand at around 300 (*Rengo Film News* 1953a, p. 19).

Despite concerns over the impact of this foreign culture upon Thailand in terms of the potential disruption to social order, there was virtually no action from Thai authorities over the significant discrepancy between the United States imports and the indigenous Thai industry. Indeed, American interests appeared largely unhindered, and one magazine illustrates the uninhibited free reign of American films within the country, fuelled largely by the communist red scare in Southeast Asia, with the remark that 'Thailand stands out as a plush green island surrounded by stormy seas' (Madar 1961b, p. 49). That such a vast import of American culture was affecting and transforming Thai society is evident through the increased concern that Thai authorities displayed towards elements that could possibly challenge and disrupt the existing social order. A 1962 American report on Asian film distribution remarked that 'Prime Minister Thanarat Sarit has ordered the banning of all films showing the latest dance craze, the twist, feeling portrayal of dance would undermine teenagers' morals' (Madar 1962b, p. 49). However, a similar 1961 report stated that '[w]ith [the] country still under martial law, [the] govt. is taking further steps to clamp down on entertainment and films are being more closely watched. Night club featuring a Western strip show was raided by police and entertainer asked to change act' (Madar 1961a, p. 72), with the reporter then listing a number of banned Hollywood productions.

The only real economic concerns raised by Thai authorities seem to be evident in a report from 1956, when Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram noted that 'between 60 to 80 million baht flowed out of the country annually in the form of remittances as a result of Thai earnings by foreign motion pictures' (*Far East Film News* 1956b, p. 11). Concern was evidently expressed over the monopolization of the film market by Hollywood, with one report indicating 'foreign pics are also blamed for decline, critics citing unrestricted screening time, though in fact, current Thai production could not fill even [a] 10% quota despite relatively inexpensive cost of producing in 16mm'

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(Madar 1961c, p. 61). Yet although Phibun expressed a desire to 'raise the standard of domestic films' (*Far East Film News* 1956a, p. 43) and calls were made to build production studios for the use of domestic filmmakers, a cost estimated at around 20 million baht, the *Far East Film News* describes this as 'far-reaching' (ibid.) and, in reality, little was done to actually aid the indigenous industry.

Yet, despite the huge Hollywood presence in Thailand, the very high number of popular 16mm indigenous live-dubbed productions indicate that the post-war period was not a downturn in Thai filmmaking and instead led to a very unique style and rich filmmaking tradition (see Ainslie 2017). However, while this period does not represent a decline in Thai filmmaking or the Thai industry, it is perhaps understandable that next to the expensive and technologically impressive Hollywood productions, the indigenous industry appeared primitive and unsophisticated. Even today, when the unique cultural contributions of this industry are recognized by historians and cinephiles, the post-war era can still be regarded with a degree of embarrassment and certainly solidified derogatory attitudes towards local filmmaking, some of which are still very much evident among social elites in Thailand today. Given the astounding success of this underfunded and highly unusual industry, however, this perspective should be understood as being fuelled much more by derogatory attitudes towards the rural and lower-class audience the productions catered for, rather than any actual concerns around film style and quality.

Ratana Pestonji, Santi Vina and the Southeast Asian Film Festival

In the post-war context, Ratana Pestonji therefore becomes a significant and important figure. As virtually the only local Thai filmmaker working in 35mm film stock with synchronized sound and who evidently struggled to do so, Ratana is imbued with a significant (and understandable) amount of national pride. Certainly, much of the available information about Ratana's films and activities focuses (rightly) upon the significance of his productions to the state of Thai film at the time and the difference this represents to the indigenous 16mm industry. Contemporary (re)constructions of Ratana are keen to emphasize both his difference to the 16mm indigenous industry at the time and to also situate him as fighting against the monopolization of Thai cinema screens by Hollywood. Certainly, Ratana's position as a struggling filmmaker striving to make high-quality films while working

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hard trying to convince Thai authorities to support indigenous filmmaking is highly sympathetic and lends itself well to such a nationalistic construction, particularly in light of his untimely death.

For instance, Thai film critic Kong Rithdee, who writes film reviews of Thai productions for English- and Thai-language Bangkok newspapers, lauds Ratana's dedication and passion for filmmaking as this, Kong believes, made his films very different to the mass-produced repetitive 16mm era and its profit-motivated entrepreneurs, which had acquired a reputation as being 'rowdy entertainment for the masses, a gaudy distraction' (Rithdee 2008). Instead, Ratana's productions qualify as 'serious art' due to his technical innovations and, most importantly, his belief that film could be more than mere entertainment. Likewise, Thai film archivist and historian Chalida Uabumrungjit applauds Ratana's efforts to retain creative control over his productions, his pushing for more governmental financial and technical support and his general desire to 'pull' Thai filmmaking up to an international level (Uabumrungjit 2003). Such sentiments are both admirable and understandable, yet they also betray a certain disapproval towards the state of Thai filmmaking at the time and reflect a slight embarrassment towards the continued predominant use of 16mm silent film stock by Thai filmmakers until 1970.

However, records from the time suggest that this position as a struggling artist fighting against Hollywood monopolization only applies to Ratana later in his filmmaking career. Instead, Ratana's actual position and activities between the twin presence of urban-based Hollywood dominance and the rural 16mm indigenous productions is complex and, in many ways, still unclear. Ratana's first feature-length film, Tukkata Jaa (Dear Dolly, 1951), was in 16mm and, evidently keen to improve and work with international standard equipment, Ratana's subsequent films are all on 35mm film stock. As a means to do so, sources indicate that the filmmaker worked closely with American filmmakers in Thailand, in particular Robert North, a former writer for 20th Century Fox, during the height of the Hollywood blacklist and the McCarthy-era Second Red Scare of the early 1950s. With Ratana as president and North as vice-president, the Far East Film Company (under the trademark 'Hanuman Productions') opened its studio in May 1953 in Wireless Road, using Ratana's own neighbourhood and land as part of its facilities. As company president, Ratana travelled to Hollywood to buy 35mm equipment, illustrating the close cooperation at this stage between local and American film moguls. The Far East Film Company is mentioned extensively in Hollywood sources, with the *Rengo Film News* mentioning a 'Gala opening' taking place in May 1953 and reporting on the 6300 square

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foot stage and equipment that 'will be made available to visiting location crews' (*Rengo Film News* 1953b, p. 39).[4]

Perhaps the most significant close cooperation represented by Ratana and American filmmaking in Thailand is the participation of the Far East Film Company in the first 'Southeast Asian Film Festival,' a largely Japanese-led initiative held in Tokyo (under US military occupation at the time) in 1954. The longest continually running film festival to date (renamed the Asian Film Festival in 1957 and later the Asia-Pacific Film Festival), the festival was spurred by the success of the Japanese film RASHOMON (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) in the West and was organized by the newly formed Federation of Motion Picture Producers in Southeast Asia (later the Federation of Motion Picture Producers Association of Asia – the FPA) of which Nagata Masaichi, of Daiei Studio, was president and Run Run Shaw was vice president (Baskett 2014; Lee 2014). Purportedly designed to foster indigenous film development in the region, the first event was held in Tokyo and included participation from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Japan (though not all countries submitted films). The event is actually described as more of a 'trade association' by American sources, as the festival was not open to the paying public and was as much about the opening up of film distribution routes and the buying and selling of equipment as it was about the actual films. In its preliminary draft, one of the festival's key objectives is stated as being 'to contribute to the development of friendly relations among the nations of Southeast Asia' (*Rengo Film News* 1953c, p. 9), although these nations are all part of the recently formed 'free Asia' bloc, united against communist forces and significantly amenable to US overseas interests (Lee 2014).

The US government was not directly involved in the festival, yet the drafting of the festival's constitution was followed intimately by the MPAA, for whom the emphasis upon removing any (potential) form of communist influence and ensuring that American interests are not threatened remained top priorities. For instance, the *Rengo Film News* includes a warning and virtual guarantee against the possibility of any negative effects to imported Hollywood productions by the participating Southeast Asian countries, stating 'while we heartily concur with the idea of the Federation and its avowed purposes, the film industry in each participating country is still too far from gaining foreign markets to instigate irritations aimed at

4 One memoir states that Robert North moved to Thailand because 'he specialized in stories with exotic locales,' perhaps reflecting the increasing importance of overseas shooting to Hollywood studios at this time (Catalano 2016, p. 80).

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imported pictures' (Ireton 1953, p. 7) and further describing the volume of the cinematic exchange the festival aims to foster as being 'wishful thinking.' The article then threatens a removal of financial support – labelled as 'friendly cooperation from overseas' – if this situation were to change and imports were affected. While the festival has been examined in depth by film historians and scholars, there is as yet little attention to participating countries other than Japan. Yet most notably, all queries relating to the combating of potential communist influences in the festival, a key concern of the United States, are raised by Thai delegates, illustrating the very stark position taken by Thailand as the most anti-communist and pro-US nation in the Southeast Asian region and the potential of Thailand to represent US interests in the festival.

The activities of Ratana and North as part of the Far East Film Company appear to have been an integral part of maintaining US interests in the first festival and both men are mentioned frequently in US records from the time, indicating the significant integration of Hollywood interests with Ratana's activities. Certainly, given the substantial size of the festival and the number of countries participating, Ratana and North's involvement as well as the creation of the company's entry SANTI VINA was given significant attention in the *Far East Film News*. The company deliberately moved to acquire and work in 35mm film in order to be able to enter the festival. Ratana later stated that he did not purposely make SANTI VINA specifically for this festival, rather the festival offered an opportunity to upgrade Far East Film's facilities to 35mm equipment in order to compete in the festival and garner international success. Yet the creation and making of the film is heavily promoted by the February issue of the *Far East Film News*, which carries a report and pictures from the location set of SANTI VINA, showing visiting filmmakers from America and Japan meeting Ratana and North and stating that the film was to be shown at the festival (*Far East Film News* 1954c, p. 15).

The company began working on the production immediately after North's return from related talks in Manila, and the film was hurriedly put together, with Ratana even continuing to cut SANTI VINA while at the festival in Japan. As the company's first 35mm production, SANTI VINA is a moralistic Buddhist story and depicts very traditional and stereotypical scenes of the caves and rice paddies of rural Thailand. SANTI VINA was given a 'special screening' to an invited audience, with Prasat Panyarachun, one of the festival judges, calling the film 'a very simple story of country people who live in the rice fields of southern Thailand' (*Far East Film News* 1954b, p. 5). The simplicity of SANTI VINA makes the film particularly notable in terms of its lack of political overtones and themes purporting to Thailand and/or elsewhere; the film

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tells the story of an impossible romance between two village sweethearts, the blind and poor boy Santi (Poonpan Rangkhavorn), and Vina (Rayvadi Sriwilai), a girl who has taken on the role of Santi's protector since early childhood. Santi's father sends his son to live with the local monk hoping that devotion to the Lord Buddha may bring about a miracle and restore his sight. When Santi and Vina meet several years later, they inevitably fall in love, yet Vina's parents disagree with the match and hastily arrange a more socially convenient marriage, while Santi becomes a monk.

For such a 'simple story,' SANTI VINA was significantly rewarded at the 1954 festival, winning the 'Golden Harvest Award' and awards for 'Best Cinematography' and 'Best Art Direction.' Ratana also received the 'AMPP Asian Cultural Award' (Association of Motion Picture Producers) of a camera worth US$16,000 for 'the picture which best reflected the culture of its country of origin in terms of creating understanding between East and West' (*Far East Film News* 1954a, p. 10). The award was presented by Hollywood film director Frank Borzage, who was specially sent to Japan for the purpose. The *Far East Film News* also included a full 'foto story' of SANTI VINA and a description of the film's narrative as well as a full-page photograph of its lead actress and a full-page notice highlighting the company's achievements at the festival. The acceptance speech was given by Thailand's ambassador to Japan Luang Phinit-Aksorn, who detailed at length the difficulties undergone to make the film (film stock had to be flown in from Rochester, refrigerated while on location, and then flown to Japan for development) (Phinit-Aksorn 1954, p. 35). The ambassador in particular made note of 'this moment in history when East and West must know each other better and better because the stakes are so high' (ibid.), so connecting the lauding of SANTI VINA back to the anti-communist political alliance between Thailand and the United States, rather than the festival's stated aims of increased inter-Asian cooperation.

After Robert North and SANTI VINA

After these activities in the early 1950s, Ratana appears to move to the periphery of the Hollywood community in Thailand where he begins to adhere to the image of the struggling artist that is so integral to his contemporary portrayal. Shortly after the Southeast Asian film festival, on 20 December 1954, Robert North died suddenly from polio (as explained to Richard Nixon in a letter from Maxine North),[5] and the *Far East Film News* carried a large

5 Hunt states this was actually from meningitis (Hunt 2007).

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full-page obituary written by Japanese producer Masaichi Nagata, while Ratana also wrote a full-page eulogy for North in the *Far East Film News* in May. While Ratana is mentioned occasionally in the *Far East Film News*, after North's death he does not appear prominently and receives no explicit support (or commendation) from US sources, certainly he is not mentioned in conjunction with the film festival again.

Most significantly, after such cooperation ceases, Ratana's films change thematically and stylistically. In contrast to the 'relaxed,' apolitical and 'traditional' Santi Vina, these later films address more complex and problematic issues and are much more stylistically inventive. While productions retain the specific engagement and representation with Thai culture and society, Ratana's films become far more critical and socially radical in their characters, stories and themes. In keeping with the versatility and inventive nature of the Indonesian, Malaysian and Philippine Cold War auteurs explored in this section of the book, Ratana's later films and characters are also more socially challenging and less aligned to dominant discourses of the state. Instead, these films offer a veiled social critique during a period of tight ideological control and political authoritarianism, most notably through their depiction of deeply flawed and conflicted 'outsider' characters. Such formal and thematic changes can be attributed to the end of Ratana's symbiotic relationship with Robert North and of his studio's direct support from US sources. As Ratana moved outside of the sphere of direct US support, his later films did not need to function in aid of the United States-Thai relationship in a way that the 'traditional' unchallenging Santi Vina could.

After Santi Vina Ratana made Rong Raem Narok (Country Hotel, 1957), a black comedy that depicts the ongoing narratives of the inhabitants of a hotel, with several well-known Thai actors playing very self-referential parts. Rong Raem Narok was the first feature-length production over which Ratana had full creative control as director, and the film is highly stylistic, purportedly inspired by Hitchcock's Rope (1948) and is similarly situated on one studio set. Although in black-and-white, Chalida Uabumrungjit considers Rong Raem Narok to be an extremely advanced film for this period (Uabumrungjit 2003) and speculates that Ratana's choice to shoot in monochrome may have been an attempt to maintain personal control over his film, which if in colour would have had to be developed outside of the country. Phrae Dam then followed, and this noiresque 'crime drama' is considered his finest work. Chalida Uabumrungjit labels Phrae Dam as 'the film that pulled Thai film up to an international level in terms of both photography technique and substance' (Uabumrungjit 2003, p. 45), due both to the location shooting and first ever use of Cinemascope to make

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widescreen possible. Phrae Dam tells the story of a gangster who fakes his death in order to avoid paying a debt and who is in love with a local widow. The film details the loyalties that the henchman is torn between – his boss and his love – and his neglect and abuse of the widow, who eventually turns to Buddhism and becomes a nun. Ratana's last film, Namtan Mai Wan (Sugar Is Not Sweet, 1965), also tackles the tricky and controversial subject of arranged marriage and the cultural pressures and obligations placed upon ethnic minorities in Thailand, though it does so through comedy. Family members have speculated that Namtan Mai Wan may have been based upon Ratana's own life experiences as a minority citizen in Thailand, and certainly the inclusion of the Indian bride Sugar and her incredulous reactions at her experiences in Thailand could be attributed to subjective experiences, given the unusual perspective they represent.

None of these later films are mentioned in any depth in Hollywood sources from Thailand at the time, despite the technical and stylistic sophistication they undoubtedly represented in Thai filmmaking. In 1956 *Far East Film News* printed a photograph from and synopsis of the Far East Film Company's next production, Chua Fa Din Salai (Forever Yours, Thawee Bang Chang, 1955), for which Ratana was reportedly the cinematographer, but no attempt was made to promote the film (1956c, p. 31). The company was again mentioned in July 1957 as completing production on Rong Raem Narok, but this was only as a small footnote to wider Hollywood activities in Thailand (*Far East Film News* 1957b, p. 19). The absence of Ratana and the Far East Film Company from such sources coincided with increased formal cooperation between Thailand and the United States and the substantial (re)orientation of Thai politics to match US overseas interests. This perhaps suggests that without the 'bridge' that Robert North represented, with the indigenous industry now firmly rooted in 16mm, and with US political, financial, ideological and military interests now assured, there was less need for continued close cooperation with and funding of Thai filmmakers. Indeed, after North's death, all reporting on indigenous Thai motion pictures by Hollywood sources appears to cease, and there is little mention of the Far East Film Company. Articles instead point to the increased and very successful presence of Hollywood production in Thailand, reporting on visits by Thai authorities to Hollywood studios (such as Phibun in June 1955) and the increased revenue in Thai takings through increasingly lavish promotional displays. Likewise, reports as to any possible effects to Hollywood dominance are also in-depth, including a 1955 report questioning whether Phibun will introduce a quota system given the amount of money flowing out of the country from film revenue (*Far East Film News* 1956b, p. 11).

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After North's death Ratana was also evidently frustrated by the lack of support for his efforts from Thai authorities, as well as the absence of the inter-Asian cooperation that the original Southeast Asian festival had represented and purportedly sought to initiate. Most interestingly, a report on Ratana appears in a January 1957 issue of the *Far East Film News*, in which Ratana calls for films in the annual film festival in the region to be judged only by three 'outside men "thoroughly grounded in their profession" from America, Britain and Europe to rate "impartially and independently" [the] product entered' (*Far East Film News* 1957a, p. 1), rather than from judges within the Asia region and the participating Asian countries. Ratana also notes that an American member could be part of the AMPP, so explaining why the American magazine was quick to report his comments. Such a statement seems to represent a reaching out to the AMPP and a signal that Ratana considers that this organization could offer a possible solution to his frustrations. This move contrasts starkly with the contemporary nationalistic construction of Ratana as a figure fighting against Hollywood monopolization. The statement also seems to represent frustration at the continued dominance of the festival by the more prominent East Asian nations (indeed, Lee [2014] understands that the festival was eventually to move in this direction), which Ratana seems also to blame for the lack of any recognition of his considerable efforts in Thailand. Such a complaint highlights how Ratana's position as a filmmaker seeking to make high-quality Thai productions was not necessarily an anti-Hollywood stance, and instead, for Ratana, his position as a 'Thai filmmaker' seems far less important than his position as simply a 'filmmaker.'

Ratana's final film in 1965 was evidently followed by a period of significant frustration in which he founded and headed the Thai Film Producers Association and argued extensively with authorities for more government support for Thai filmmaking. However, his untimely death in 1970 put a clear end to his interesting yet brief contribution to Thai film history. By the early 1970s, Thai filmmaking had also begun to move beyond the silent 16mm era, reflecting the general changes enacted upon the nation by increased wealth, infrastructure and social mobility. Highly successful watershed productions such as Monrak Lukthung (Magical Love of Country Music, Rangsi Thatsanapayak, 1970) and Tone (Piak Poster, 1970) contained a more inventive film style and also began to engage with the Americanized pop culture that had flooded into Thailand, questioning traditional Thai social mores and morals in ways that the more formulaic 16mm productions of the 1960s had not.

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The Far East Film Company largely vanishes from Thai film history narratives after Ratana's death, though it was continued by his family members, providing technical filmmaking support to other filmmakers rather than making films. However, in the early twenty-first century references to the company appear again after the much later death of Robert North's wife, Maxine North, causing us to further question the function of the company and Ratana's role within it. Maxine North stayed in Thailand for the remainder of her life, dying at age 83 in Pattaya in 2003. After her husband's death, she had founded North Star Co., very successfully selling Polaris bottled water (co-founded with former Deputy Prime Minister Rak Panyarachut, which monopolized the Thai market for around three decades by supplying drinking water to American troops) as well as a number of other successful companies, becoming renowned in Thailand for her success and entrepreneurism. Records indicate that the Norths were embedded within American politics at this time. Prior to leaving for Thailand, North and his wife, Maxine, campaigned for Richard Nixon in the 1950 California Senate election, and Maxine North continued to write to Nixon from Thailand throughout his vice-presidential tenure after the death of her husband, sending gifts for his wife and giving regular unsolicited updates about the political situation in Thailand that are vehemently anti-communist in tone.[6]

As a prominent American entrepreneur in post-war Thailand with links to Nixon, Maxine North is mentioned in many histories of Thai politics during the Cold War. Indeed, interestingly, after her death, an obituary in the *LA Times* describes Maxine North as the 'wife of an undercover CIA agent,' and in particular describe the Far East Film Company as a 'cover' for Robert North's work with the CIA (*LA Times* 2003). Likewise, a number of memoirs and works of scholarly analysis that began to appear in the early 2000s seeking to document CIA activities in Southeast Asia during the Cold War also mention Robert North and the Far East Film Company. According to the memoirs of former CIA officer and member of the White House Special Investigations Unit under Nixon, E. Howard Hunt (later prosecuted in the Watergate scandal), North was a Stanford graduate who had previously worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II and had been stationed in China, combating the spread of communist forces

6 A series of letters (preserved in the archives of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum) between the couple and then-Vice President Richard Nixon (which are continued by Maxine after her husband's death and are available up to 1958) point to a largely one-sided relationship in which the Norths appear as entrepreneurs keen to cultivate a relationship with a politically influential figure. The letters are incomplete, with several labelled as containing 'restricted material.'

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(Hunt 2007). After World War II, North was writing B-movie scripts for producer Sol Wurtzel in Hollywood, briefly teaming up with Hunt to do so, though unsuccessfully. Hunt informs North about the newly formed CIA, which North is apparently extremely enthusiastic about, and Hunt then later refers to North as 'posted in Bangkok' and 'trying to establish a Thai film industry,' later describing how North flew to Washington, DC, and Mexico during this time to assist in fabricating anti-communist stories in collusion with Hunt and with CIA support (ibid.). Such information is very different to the contemporary Thai understanding of North, which describes him simply as a Hollywood producer who moved to Thailand. Likewise, Bertil Lintner (1999) records that the Far East Film Company was one of a number of initiatives created through funding from OSS/CIA operatives (others being the *Bangkok World* newspaper and Jim Thompson's famous Thai silk initiatives). According to Lintner, the company served as a 'conduit for CIA money to the obscure Southeast Asian Supplies Corporation,' another CIA front which (supported by Thai authorities) coordinated the refuelling of airdrops to the Kuomintang in Burma (KMT) (ibid.).[7] Others describe the Far East Film Company as 'CIA-affiliated' and North's 'activities' in Thailand as being to 'support paramilitary training, covert police intelligence collection, sabotage, and assassination operations directed at subversive targets on Thailand's borders' (Gibson and Chen 2011).

While such evidence suggests that the Far East Film Company was actually deeply connected to CIA and pro-US operations in Thailand at the time, there is no mention of Ratana within such accounts. In light of such heavy American involvement in the formation of both the company and the film that is constructed as so integral to Ratana's personal vision and integrity, Ratana's position vis-à-vis the history of Thai filmmaking and Hollywood in Thailand must be re-considered. While Ratana's ability, passion and skills as a filmmaker are beyond doubt, evidence suggests that his desire to continue making films in the early 1950s continued regardless of whose funding was supporting him and the politics behind this support. This positioning then calls into question the contemporary nationalistic constructions of the filmmaker and recalls how Thai and Hollywood interests at this time were not opposed.

7 US funding and supplying of this organization was a CIA-initiated project that aimed to prepare the Kuomintang forces for an eventual invasion of Yunnan. Most significantly, this project could not take place without official Thai diplomatic cover, in order to ensure both secrecy and deniability. Phibun was happy to provide such covert assistance, as this was in keeping with a desire to both increase Thai influence in northern Burma and weaken this traditional Thai enemy (Fineman 1997, pp. 138-139).

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Conclusion

Despite the relatively small number of films made in his lifetime, the skills and the significance of Ratana Pestonji are highly significant to any understanding and/or analysis of Thai film history. This chapter has sought to better understand Ratana's position within Thai filmmaking and relationship with Hollywood studios during the early 1950s, a crucial period in which Thai politics was being (re)shaped dramatically to adhere to US interests and during which, in contrast to his later construction, Ratana appears to have instead worked closely with such forces. I argue that the patriotic image of Ratana as a struggling filmmaker fighting for support against uncaring Thai authorities and Hollywood imperialism is one that is only relevant later in his career, when a lack of support due to various changing circumstances necessitated such a struggle. However, there is as yet much information still to uncover regarding Ratana's activities during this time, and this chapter should only be seen as a small part of such a journey. Regardless of Ratana's varying position between these numerous forces, the competence and ingenuity of this filmmaker is not in question. Thai sources are right to highlight and celebrate Ratana's contribution to Thai film history well into the twenty-first century, and indeed contemporary Thai filmmakers also still cite his influence as a rare visionary and inspiring auteur in a nation in which personal expression is all too often subject to state repression. The simplified and oft-romanticized contemporary narrative of Ratana, while flawed in many ways, perhaps therefore performs an important function in Thailand today.

Partial Filmography of Ratana Pestonji

Tang. 1937.
White Boat. 1939. Short film.
Phanthaay Norasingh (Oarman Norasingh). 1949. Cinematographer (dir. Thawee Bang Chang).
Tukkata Jaa (Dear Dolly). 1951.
Santi Vina. 1954. Cinematographer (dir. Thavi Na Bangchang).
Chua Fa Din Salai (Forever Yours). 1955. Cinematographer (dir. Thawee Bang Chang).
Rong Raem Narok (Country Hotel). 1957.
Sawan Mued (Dark Heaven). 1958.
Phrae Dam (Black Silk). 1961.
Namtan Mai Wan (Sugar Is Not Sweet). 1964.

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9 Locating Mike de Leon in Philippine Cinema*

Patrick F. Campos

Abstract
Mike de Leon, whose films helped define the 'second golden age' (roughly from 1975 to 1984) of Philippine cinema, has been hailed as 'local cinema's only living film master.' This essay analyses how the discourse of the golden age came about by interpreting the meaning of De Leon's location in this discourse. Tracing the director's career in chronological fashion, it discusses how his films contributed to a progressive nationalist cinema during the period of martial law under Marcos but also how they increasingly and reflexively interrogated the significance of the golden age in the post-Marcos era. Finally, it evaluates the conceptual boundaries of the golden age through an appreciation of the trajectory of his cinema from 1985 to 1999.

Keywords: Mike de Leon, Philippine cinema, martial law, golden age

Philippine cinema is one hundred years old in 2019, dating from the premiere screening of José Nepomuceno's feature film, Dalagang Bukid (Country Maiden), in Manila in 1919. It would be a few years older, if we are to count other firsts – the production of the first narrative features[1] on national hero José Rizal by Americans in close collaboration with Filipino theatre troupes in 1912; the establishment of the first Filipino-owned film company, Nepomuceno's Malayan Movies, in 1917, 20 years after the arrival of motion picture in Manila; or the shooting and screening in Cebu of the first newsreel by Nepomuceno in 1918. From 1919 onward, film production by native

* This chapter is based on Campos (2016, Chapter 2).

1 There were two features that came out within days of each other in August of 1912.

Khoo, Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (eds), *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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Filipinos like Vicente Salumbides, Carmen Concha and Julian Manansala continued to grow, with silent cinema coming to a close when Nepomuceno produced the first sound film, Punyal na Ginto (Golden Dagger), in 1932.

The coming of sound encouraged the foundation of several film studios, including Filippine Films, Parlatone Hispano-Filipino, Excelsior Pictures and X'Otic Films. After World War II, a more clearly defined studio system emerged and strengthened the film industry by managing their own lots and sound stages, contracting artists, technicians, and publicists, building up their stable of stars and producing genre film staples alongside a few 'prestige' projects. Owing mainly to the productions of the 'big three' studios (Sampaguita Pictures, Premiere Productions and LVN Pictures), observers marked the decade of the 1950s as the 'golden age' of Filipino genre cinema (see Arriola, this volume, Chapter 2).

By the early 1960s, however, the studios were plagued by labour issues and faced with legal battles, eventually leading to the collapse of the studio system. In the wake of this collapse, independent producers filled in the gap by producing a host of popular movies, including the *bakbakan* [action genre], some of which lucratively imitated James Bond movies and Hollywood Westerns, convoluted melodramas based on *komiks* or serialized graphic novels, as well as the *bomba*, cheaply made sex films that yielded sure box office returns. This was the film industrial context when dictator Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972.

Much of what we have come to know about and passed on as memories of the 'second golden age' of Philippine cinema (roughly 1974 to 1986), responding to and paralleling the Marcos regime, was written in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The new golden age, which flowered with the coming of young, audacious and inventive filmmakers, was extolled for the period's artistic blossoming and its cinema's politicization in a time of repression and social unrest. The kind of collective remembering occasioned by writing about the golden age became more urgent after the People Power uprising in 1986, when Filipino film was thrust into a period of soul-searching amidst a semblance of freedom and peace.

In 1998, a year after the centennial of the arrival of the motion picture in the Philippines, film artist and historian Clodualdo del Mundo Jr wrote an article that described the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s as the peak in Filipino film history ushered in by directors Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal and Mike de Leon. The naming of the triumvirate was by that time a familiar metonym among cinephiles to signify the 'second golden age' of Philippine cinema (Campos 2016, p. 141). These references by Del Mundo were significant because the film industry was then suffering from the blow

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of the Asian Financial Crisis and a reminder of the glory days was much needed in charting Philippine cinema's possible future into the new century.

This essay traces how Mike de Leon (hereafter MDL), who has been called 'local cinema's only living film master' since the untimely deaths of Brocka (1991) and Bernal (1996), came to occupy his place in this golden age (Campos 2016, p. 141). It does so by analysing how the discourse of this particular golden age came about and by interpreting the meaning of MDL's location in this discourse. It also does so by examining how writings about MDL by entertainment journalists and film critics have slowly shifted in their regard for the director, from picturing him as 'unsure' and 'compromising' to considering him as an uncompromising master. Finally, it evaluates the conceptual boundaries of the golden age through an appreciation of the trajectory of MDL's cinema.

Writing 'Mike de Leon' as Insider and Outsider, 1975-1983

The year 1976 was a landmark in both Philippine filmmaking and film studies. Many films released that year, including Insiang (Brocka), Nunal Sa Tubig (A Speck in the Lake, Bernal), and Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon? (This Was How We Were, What Happens to You Now?, Eddie Romero), have come to be regarded as classics. The first film critics group, the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (MPP), was founded and its members began to publish works that signalled the coming of more robust film studies in the country.

Providing an account of the situation that year, critics Petronilo Bn. Daroy and Bienvenido Lumbera wrote separate essays that painted a picture of the arrival of a new cinema.[2] Daroy writes of a growing 'trend toward serious cinema' (1983 [1976], p. 58),[3] while Lumbera delineates the movements that Philippine cinema was taking towards 'film as social art,' which he associates

2 All the critics mentioned in this essay are current or former members of the MPP.

3 The use of 'serious' is recurrent in the MPP's writings and connotes the artistic quality of films that tended to be non-generic or uncommercial. 'Serious,' moreover, frequently refers to realist works. In one sense, this may be a familiar bias, the preference of critics for verisimilitude and complex storytelling over simplistic plots and formulaic visual treatment; certainly, the MPP's use of 'serious' connoted such a bias. In another sense, the MPP championed films that dared to present social realities in the context of a repressive environment and filmmakers that defied censors and confronted the dictator even in the face of threat; in this sense, the group's lower regard for 'escapist' films and preference for 'serious' ones take on another layer of meaning (Campos 2016, pp. 282-287).

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with Brocka, and the 'art film,' which he associates with Bernal (1976, pp. 43-44). Neither article mentions MDL yet as being part of these movements, even though he produced and photographed Brocka's critically acclaimed Maynila Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag (Manila in the Claws of Light, 1975) the year before.

Upon the arrival of his horror film, Itim (Rites of May, 1976), however, the basic formulation of writing about MDL was introduced. Critic Pio de Castro III's review (1983 [1977]) of MDL's film may be taken as prototypical. He writes, regarding the filmmaker, that, before Itim, MDL was one of the creative forces behind Maynila; that he grew up in the compound of LVN Pictures (a major studio that was founded before the Pacific War and continued to flourish after), being the grandson of 'the old lady of Philippine movies,' LVN Pictures's matriarch, Doña Sisang (Narcisa Buencamino vda. de León), and the son of 'Asia's most respected producer,' Manuel de Leon; and that he has technical flair. Regarding the film, De Castro writes that Itim is enigmatic and that it will be the 'touchstone against which all other films in 1977 will be gauged' (1983 [1977]).

This textual formulation positions MDL as an insider of the budding new cinema as well as this cinema's glorious history, being an heir to LVN Pictures, which produced prestigious films like Anak Dalita (Child of Sorrow, 1956), Badjao (1957), Malvarosa (1958), and Biyaya ng Lupa (Blessings of the Land, 1959) and helped shape the 1950s as the 'golden era' of studio filmmaking (Garcia 1983 [1972]; David 1990). Through his review, De Castro thus grafts MDL into the history of Filipino film that Daroy and Lumbera, along with other MPP members, were beginning to rewrite.

In spite of receiving positive reviews, however, Itim was a commercial flop. Then it won Best Film in the 1978 Asian Film Festival, and the MPP named it as one of the Ten Outstanding Films of the Decade. This reception of Itim initiated the polarized articulation of the MDL film as critically acclaimed but not commercially viable.

With the release of his second film, the romantic drama Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising (Moments in a Stolen Dream, 1977), MDL's thematic preoccupation and stylistic propensity became discernible. Thematically, he is keenly aware of his moneyed protagonists' class belonging and the excesses and perversions of the gentry. He displays a critical attitude towards traditions that sire but also alienate sensitive individuals, personified in his early films by cultured male artistic types that brood rather than rebel. Stylistically, the MDL film exhibits the sensibility of the art film, lingering and atmospheric, and the conventions of the Hollywood film, tightly edited for continuity and hewing closely, but not quite, to genre cinema. This combination of his themes and style put him at odds with Filipino movie fans.

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In 1980, after having made two films, MDL is tentatively complimented in an article by entertainment journalist Ruben V. Nepales as 'an auteur in a way,' but one who 'has not mastered any film yet' (1980, pp. 4, 24). Nepales describes MDL as a 'youthful moviemaker,' making a 'big compromise' by shifting genres in the hopes of earning profit (ibid.). At the same time, Nepales writes of MDL as a director 'being ranked' with Brocka, Bernal, Romero, and Celso Ad. Castillo 'on the basis of his two films' (ibid.).[4] The phrase suggests that having had lesser experience (all four directors started years ahead of MDL), his works can already be compared to theirs. But it also suggests that he has made too few films, which was unusual relative to the three to five pictures per year made by these more experienced directors.

For his apparent difference from his peers, MDL was being called an 'experimental filmmaker' in the entertainment press. In an interview, however, he emphatically refuses the label and claims that he is only too willing to explore various genres (ibid.). He explains, as if to apologize for his previous box office let-downs, that Itim was a commercial film, that Kung Mangarap was guided by commercial considerations, and that Kakabakaba Ka Ba? (Are You Nervous?, 1980), his next project, was 'a different kind of commercial [film],' one that would 'tap a larger market' (Caagusan 1983, pp. 49-50; Nepales 1980, p. 4). He clarifies, moreover, that after releasing Itim, he developed an 'awareness that you don't make a film for yourself. You make a film for others to watch' (Nepales 1980, p. 4).

These statements are noteworthy because they reveal MDL's intentions, self-assessment and desire to reach a wider public. Darker though his next films were, the thriller Kisapmata (In the Blink of an Eye, 1981) and the teen movie Batch '81 (1982) were likewise aimed at the mass audience. The former was exhibited and swept all the major awards at the Metro Manila Film Festival, which was and to this day remains the most avidly patronized festival by the mass audience. The latter was filled with 'popular elements' and 'box office come-ons,' like musical numbers and sensational scenes of sex and violence (Lumbera 1982, p. 174).

In spite of his intentions and efforts to reach out to a wider audience, however, by 1983, MDL began to be written about as an outsider. After five films (in eight years) and numerous awards, he had not had a major box office hit. Critics highlighted his consistent technical achievements, which they tellingly compared with the uneven technical quality of the films of Brocka, Bernal, Romero and Castillo, who have all nevertheless achieved

4 Daroy and Lumbera in their 1976 articles also name Romero and Castillo among others, along with Brocka and Bernal, as standard-bearers of the new cinema.

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commercial successes (Lumbera 1982; Cruz 1984; David 1990).[5] Apart from his uneasy relationship with movie fans, observers also noted MDL's growing notoriety with producers and censors (Caagusan 1983). Unlike Brocka and Bernal, whose conflicts with producers and censors were confined to their explicitly political films, which were few relative to their numerous works, the production of most of MDL's films were beset by such conflicts, owing both to his famed mercurial temper on set and to his proclivity to choose controversial themes like incest and shoot sensational scenes such as those depicting physical and mental torture. In short, MDL was out of place, for he neither was the commercial director that he claimed to be, nor was he like the serious directors that others claimed he was.

Further evidence of MDL's outsider status is his absence from an early and important film studies anthology, *Readings in Philippine Cinema* (Guerrero 1983). The book was published after MDL had already made five films, but only Brocka, Bernal and Romero were featured in the volume as directors who adapt their art to popular taste. In an interview in 1983, MDL himself admitted, 'I never thought I was really in the industry, in fact even up to now, because I was sort of in it and out of it at the same time' (Caagusan 1983, p. 48).

Locating MDL in the Nationalist Agenda, 1980-1984

The assassination of opposition senator Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino on 21 August 1983 became a watershed moment in Philippine history for renewed resistance to the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Soon after Ninoy's assassination, MDL went to the streets to direct (uncredited) the little-seen short film Signos (Omens, 1984). The Brechtian-style documentary put on record the anticensorship protest movement, the labour and student rallies, and the funeral of Ninoy attended by thousands that were all happening at the time. Its subversive message positioned MDL at the centre of political filmmaking, a brand of cinema that was the locus of the kind of progressive film scholarship advocated by the MPP during the period.

What particularly animated the MDL heroics, however, was Sister Stella L. (1984). The film foregrounds the themes of social unrest, political

5 In the same period, from 1976 to 1983, Brocka and Bernal made over 20 films each, Castillo just under 20, and Romero about 10. Many of these films were box office hits but are now largely forgotten for various reasons, and only a handful of them are regarded today as canonical films. In contrast, all of MDL's films during these years, few though they are, continue to enjoy a generally positive regard among cinephiles and filmmakers.

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abuse and poverty; the iconography of rallies and demonstrations; and the characterization of protagonists awakening into activism. It is about the titular nun who, through her interactions with exploited labourers, begins to see how the rich and powerful terrorize unionists, use armed force against them and hide behind legalities. When she witnesses the torture and extrajudicial killing of the union leader, Ka Dencio, Sister Stella's commitment to the workers' fight is sealed. Breaking the fourth wall, she calls upon the viewers to rise up and stand in solidarity with the oppressed.

Quickened by the twin historical signifiers of Marcos and martial law against which MPP was discursively defining a defiant Philippine cinema, Sister Stella L., which articulated the people's struggle against a repressive order, indelibly recast MDL's location in the nationalist agenda of film criticism.[6] For its electric synchronicity with the politicized atmosphere of the times, the film 'acquired the strongest round of raves and cheers (not to mention trophies) [MDL] had ever received' (David 1990, p. 36). And for this radical film, his place in Philippine cinema was culturally secured. Later references to this period's cinema always name Sister Stella L. as a major work.

What makes Sister Stella L. significant for locating MDL in Philippine cinema is its reputation as a commercial film that addressed the mass audience but flopped, even if it featured Vilma Santos, one of the biggest stars in local movies, and even if its clarion call came apropos of Ninoy's assassination. Its failure to attract audiences signified for conscientious artists and critics the predicament of local filmmaking. Critic Emmanuel Reyes captured this sentiment well when he described it as 'the best Filipino film in many years,' but '*not* a representative of mainstream Philippine cinema' (1984; 1989, p. 9, original emphasis).

The coming of Sister Stella L. signalled a discursive turn for MDL and reified his ironic position. He is an insider of the commercial industry but an outsider when it comes to commercial returns. He is marginal in the movie-viewing habits of the public but a central figure in Philippine cinema. He is irrelevant to popular taste but is relevant in the development of a national cinema, as far as critics are concerned. From the perspective of Sister Stella L., one can generically remap MDL's corpus from Kakabakaba (1980) onward not as individual films that struggled for box office success but rather as texts that cumulatively symptomatized the trauma of history, as allegories that progressively narrated the national struggle against state repression.

6 Marcos was elected president in 1965. The official martial law years were from 1972 to 1981, but he ruled the Philippines with military force until 1986.

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MDL initiated his narrative of national struggle with KAKABAKABA, a riotous comedy that features two romantic couples embroiled in a case of mistaken identity and caught between feuding criminal syndicates – Chinese versus Japanese on Philippine soil – trafficking drugs sub rosa through the Roman Catholic Church. It is strategically self-effacing in its political intent and double-edged in its artistic intent. By treating as a joke the foreign control of the Philippine economy and connecting it to blind religiosity, the film makes palatable an unsavoury message. And by exploiting generic closure (the couples get married), the film wryly underlines how escapism keeps mass audiences unaware of the nation's systematic entanglement with its exploiters.

KISAPMATA (1981), MDL's next film after KAKABAKABA, is adapted from a crime report about a domineering father who menaces his family and eventually massacres them and kills himself. The adaptation works beyond the generic constraints of melodrama and crime drama, beyond being merely about murder and suicide, however. It instead tells a Gothic horror story with its twisted plot, perverted religious motif, and hellish imagery, turning the domestic story into a seemingly supernatural one. Even without explicit references to national politics, the film, through its crafty allusions, can be seen as an allegory of the dictatorial regime, with the father's house representing the nation and the monstrous patriarch, Marcos. The implication of MDL's genre mixing of melodrama, crime, and horror is significant, because the film charges the dictator not with violation of the law but with damnable sin.

Lastly, BATCH '81 (1982) follows the travails of a group of neophytes, as they willingly endure the physical, mental and emotional torture that comes with their initiation to the Alpha Kappa Omega fraternity. It refers to but moves away from the plot and theme of the coming-of-age teen movie that usually tells the story of how young people forge friendships and discover their identities amidst the insecurity of youth. Moving towards non-genre, BATCH '81 relinquishes all of genre's comforting resolutions, as it makes the viewer a witness to the violence of teenagers mistaking blind obedience for brotherhood and sacrificing individuality for irrational conformity. As such, it is an incisive depiction of the microcosmic workings of fascism and its reliance on thought control and belligerent tribal dynamics.

KAKABAKABA projects blissfully ignorant characters played for fools by the system; in KISAPMATA, a captive household is terrorized by an obsessive patriarch; and BATCH '81 shows teenagers who are inured to violence, rallying around a perverted cause. Fusing sophistication and sensationalism, highbrow and pop appeal, and psychical and pathological grotesquery, these filmic allegories represent a nation uneasy with itself, a nation where

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the ordinary folk is not privy to the machinations that are plotted by the powerful in hidden places. But the filmmaker is in the know, and he is lifting the veil from where he is, with some distance from the mass audience which he himself cannot span. The geography of these filmic texts reveals the dismantling of the very generic foundation upon which the films are built and poses an alternative to genre cinema that dominates the screen and the attention of the public. These films paved the way for the arrival of Sister Stella L.

Tracing the critical writings on MDL from 1984 onward, one can also decipher the contours of Philippine cinema as it was being defined by committed critics (Campos 2016, pp. 89-91). It was in the budding scholarship on Filipino film, under the aegis of a nationalist agenda, that MDL's location in Philippine cinema was determined. As mentioned above, prior to the presidency of Marcos, the post-war flowering of industrial cinema in the 1950s was popularly remembered as the golden era of Filipino film. But the interest by critics in cinema as a 'serious' cultural form and not merely as a commercial product grew out of the politicized milieu of the martial law period. After the fall of Marcos, a move to define a new golden age came to the fore, drawing upon the alternative history written by MPP members since the 1970s.

There is no agreement as to the exact years that constitute this new golden age, although the efforts to circumscribe such a period were undertaken in the same conjuncture. Critics Joel David and Nestor Torre offer two different periodizations. David (1990) cites Maynila as the starting point and historicizes a period that ends in 1984, while Torre (1994) begins with Brocka's Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang (You Were Weighed and Found Wanting) in 1974 and ends the period in 1990.[7] The difference in dating is not as important as the shaping of the discourse, however, because the golden age is not anchored on a temporal 'age' but on the canon. Predictably, socially relevant films that were presumably not made merely for commercial purposes tended to be extolled as foundational films, indicating the distinction between the golden ages of the post-war period and the Marcos period. Sister Stella L. was central in this periodizing, even while MDL occupied a marginal space in the industry.

7 Torre argues that the period in question was the 'third golden age,' while David, who initiated the naming of the period in 1989, referred to it as the 'second.' Bernal, in an interview with film critic and scholar Aruna Vasudev in 1995, refers to it as the 'second golden age,' implying his acceptance of David's nomenclature and the currency it has achieved by the mid-1990s. David's dating also appears to be the one generally accepted today, because the golden age is primarily remembered vis-à-vis the Marcos regime and David's periodization ends just before the ousting of Marcos in 1986.

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Critics in the early 1990s continued to name the Young Turks, Brocka and Bernal, and the old sage, Romero, as the leaders of the 'second' golden age, although Romero would be seen more as exceeding the period because he started his career in the 1940s (see Barker and Imanjaya, this volume, Chapter 11). In this context, MDL's cinema took on a new significance, finding its place in a kind of triangular balance along with Brocka's and Bernal's, with all three directors making progressive films, but MDL, unlike them, making artistically uncompromising ones that resisted the commercial system and challenged rather than adapted to industry values and popular taste. Understandably, every film by MDL up to 1984 is listed in the unofficial canon of the 'second' golden age (Tiongson 1983, 1994, 2001; David 1990; Torre 1994).

In entertainment journalism in the early 1980s, the picture that we get of MDL is that of a compromising filmmaker who is aware of the commercial necessities of film production and yet is without mastery of the craft. These descriptions of MDL would become discursively unconceivable. The writings of MPP members consecrated MDL's outsider status within the canon of 'serious' directors that in turn helped buttress the idea of the new golden age (Reyes 1989; David 1990; Torre 1994; Lumbera 1989, 1992; Tiongson 1994). The location of MDL in the discourse of national cinema, however, meant that not all of his films could be admitted in the canon. And his succeeding works after Sister Stella L. would push the boundaries of his outsider status beyond the nationalist agenda.

Interrogating the Golden Age, 1985-1992

MDL's next film, the *komiks* adaptation, Hindi Nahahati Ang Langit (Heaven Is Indivisible, 1985), is a continuation of his thematic preoccupation – a critique of the gentry, of institutions and traditions, and of power relations. It tells the story of the children of wealthy parents, the adoptive siblings Noel and Melody, who grow up hating each other, marrying other people, and going into business as competitors, only to admit in the end that they have been in love with each other all along. After coming to terms with their true feelings, they begin to consolidate their wealth, to the frustration of their spurned spouses.

Considering the abovementioned counter-generic map of MDL's cinema, the film is disconcerting in its fidelity to popular form, and an allegorical reading is difficult to conceive, especially since the film breaks the ascending movement that should have followed the explosion of Sister Stella L.

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Based on MDL's stated desire to reach out to an audience, however, Hindi Nahahati should be seen as a moment of success. It is MDL's first and only veritable commercial hit, but surveys of Philippine film history and the assessments of MDL's body of works methodically and habitually avoid it. The film's omission from key pedagogical texts clearly reveals the trajectory of the nationalist agenda and the place of MDL in it.

However, overlooking Hindi Nahahati means failing to appreciate its historical significance and critical edge. Indeed, the film is devoid of social consciousness in the sense that was validated by nationalist criticism. It is not about economic poverty, social unrest, and political awakening. But in another sense, it is socially conscious in the way that MDL understood his class belonging, being a scion of an influential family. The film is a tale of treachery, with one family plotting the downfall and endeavouring to destroy another family – allegorically, the same convoluted historical narrative of the Philippine nation ruled by the oligarchy made up of families who intermarry and plot against each other to gain control over the state and the economy and to consolidate power (McCoy 1993).

In Hindi Nahahati, MDL asks the viewers to summon their knowledge of the wanton lifestyle of the filthy rich. This is familiar territory for an MDL film, with wealthy protagonists operating on self-destructive mode. But unlike in his earlier films, there is no self-destruction in Hindi Nahahati; the powerful, despite complications and postponements, get what they want. This is MDL, self-aware of his subject position as he draws near the mass audience and gives them an unrelenting picture of his own class. In this light, Hindi Nahahati is more unnerving, for in comparison to his earlier films, it is not thoroughly reliant on the intellectual subtleties executed for the knowing audience but aims instead to be grasped by the many at face value.

The film is, moreover, a counterpoint to Sister Stella L., which is the portrayal of the lives of the down and out. While Sister Stella L. in vibe and timbre could have been congruously followed by a more subversive film just before the 1986 People Power Revolution that would oust Marcos, MDL seemed to have gone on ahead to a time that was yet to occur. In hindsight, Hindi Nahahati may be read as bearing an uncanny association with Philippine history *after* Marcos and foreshadowing the failure that followed the People Power Revolution, when national wealth and power reconsolidated in the hands of the oligarchy, which includes the family of Ninoy's wife, Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, who will succeed Marcos. A retroactive appreciation of Hindi Nahahati allows us to see MDL's cinema as responding not only to Marcos but also as a harbinger of post-Marcos

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Philippines, which eventually saw the perfidious appropriation by the elite of the radical meaning of the revolution.

In 1986, when the nation was ecstatic over the perceived triumph of the People Power Revolution, MDL made one of his darkest films, the psychological thriller Bilanggo Sa Dilim (Imprisoned in Darkness). This time, he unmistakably located himself alongside alternative filmmakers outside of the mainstream industry, as Bilanggo, the first full-length video-movie, premiered along with experimental short films at the first Independent Film and Video Festival. The festival was a precursor to what would become the independent digital cinema of the new century.

Bilanggo is about a wealthy photographer, a psychopath whose real identity remains mysteriously veiled throughout the story, and his habit of abducting women to turn them into his 'friends.' What he craves is to make the women love him, something that is far more meaningful to him than forcing them to have sex with him. He desires their minds and not just their bodies. But he is tipped over to the point of no return, when he admits in the end that it is impossible for him to win in the game that he set himself to play, for no one who is forced could give her love willingly. Upon realizing this, he decides 'to disappear, to vanish.'

Bilanggo broke from both the critical bias for social relevance and the commercial necessity of ritual escapism. Building a claustrophobic and melancholic plot around an irascible antihero, the film apparently disregarded the mass audience and rejected the zeitgeist of 1986. It appeared to be neither popular for being a generic suspense film nor nationalist for being unpopular. As with Hindi Nahahati, Bilanggo shows MDL as being not exactly in-sync with his time, beside it but not in step with it. After the film's limited and non-commercial exhibition, MDL decided to retire from filmmaking, a decision that was a counterpoint to the celebrations for the nation's regaining of democracy.

MDL returned five years later with Aliwan Paradise (Entertainment Paradise, 1992), one of the segments in the omnibus Southern Winds produced by the Japan Foundation. MDL's return coincided with the conjuncture of the writing of the second golden age, and Aliwan was MDL's apparent repudiation of it.

The narrative setting in Aliwan is a speculative future, in which high-tech Manila is globally networked and yet populated more than ever by jobless people, all willing to do anything, including sell anything, including themselves, and kill each other, just to escape the country. In this world, Julio Madiaga and Ligaya Paraiso, the tragic lovers in Brocka's Maynila, meet again. Julio and Ligaya are applying for jobs as entertainers overseas in

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the office of the newly established Ministry of Entertainment. The ministry is the film's obvious jab at the collusion of state and business to export Filipino labour for the supposed benefit of the nation. In the process of their application, Julio and Ligaya are exploited and humiliated. But their misery, it becomes apparent to the ministry's impresario, is so miserable that it is entertaining. Thus, the impresario, in the service of state and capital, jumps on this 'radical' entertainment's staggering export potential. The ministry, in the end, invests in the making of 'Third World' films to cash in on this potential and casts Julio and Ligaya in the lead roles.

Addressed to the watching world that has known Filipino 'Third World' films through international film festivals and, more important, the intelligentsia that extolled the national cinema that created the realist types of Julio Madiaga and Ligaya Paraiso, Aliwan is a self-assured reproach by an outsider. A parabolic satire, it is a sweeping critique of Philippine history, society and cinema, which have turned poverty into an industry and a culture. His double position as insider and outsider of the film industry, as well as his elite position as hero of the golden age, allows MDL to interrogate from a unique angle the discourse of Philippine cinema and the social and cinematic myths that such a national cinema has taken for granted.

Aliwan is a black comedy that requires the viewer, especially Filipino viewers, to retrieve historical and cinematic memory and to perform complex cognitions. The satirical montage in the opening includes the scene in Maynila of the anti-fascist rally that Julio chooses to ignore and a scene from MDL's Itim of penitent religious devotees self-flagellating in public. These two filmic images, which MDL himself has had a hand at producing and making historically significant, are juxtaposed with scenes from extant pre-Pacific War films, and stills from the world wars and the People Power Revolution. This montage encapsulates Philippine (film) history, strung together to appear unified and sarcastically celebratory. The closing sequences are a series of ironic references to urban slum realism and rural romanticism, allusions to the second and first golden ages of Philippine cinema, respectively.

These familiar sociocultural-turned-cinematic icons are refracted across time through the lenses of military rule during the Marcos regime and the succeeding socio-economic stagnation during the Aquino administration. Aliwan's summoning of old canonical films and its mockery of them leave the viewer with a sharpened sense of a heroic past that is disconnected from an absurd present. In a span of less than an hour, the viewer recognizes in Aliwan the worldliness of the filmmaker, who has been through these times and finds every reason to resist sentimentalism and oversimplification.

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Notably, after the limited exhibition of Aliwan in local screens, MDL temporarily retired from filmmaking once again.

That images from the golden ages of Philippine cinema vivify Aliwan suggests that the glorious history and radical potential that characterized these periods are already passé, as far as MDL is concerned, and that new forms must be forged if any past glory is to be revived. Such an assumption would explain the unconventional form that Aliwan has taken. Unlike all of MDL's prior films, Aliwan is completely non-generic, overriding genre considerations in favour of highlighting national themes and challenging historical imaginaries of the nation. It moves beyond the 'commercial compromise' of Kakabakaba, the allegories that were Kisapmata and Batch '81, and the social realism of Sister Stella L. In short, it moves away from MDL's own cinema and the cinema of the so-called golden age.

Conclusion

In 1999, a year after Del Mundo invoked the triumvirate of the golden age in his charting of the future, MDL returned with Bayaning Third World (Third World Hero) and pushed the boundaries yet again by questioning the hero worship of José Rizal, just after the nation had celebrated the centennial of the Philippine Revolution (1896-1898) with several Rizal films. In the early 2000s, looking back to the recent memory of Bayani[8] and before that, Aliwan, a younger generation of filmmakers, including Lav Diaz, Raymond Red and Jeffrey Jeturian, who were then poised to change the course of cinema history with their own digital films, acknowledged their debt to MDL and his no-compromise ethos (Campos 2016, pp. 120-121). Indeed, it is his ethics and not his individual films that the next generation sought to emulate.

Interestingly, part of MDL's uncompromising practice is disputing accepted history, a questioning constantly embodied by his cinema, including his latest film, Citizen Jake (2018), that was occasioned by President Rodrigo Duterte's move to give Marcos a hero's burial. Bilanggo pathologizes uncompromising (artistic) vision; Aliwan catechizes the shortcomings of reified history; Bayani undermines national celebrations and official heroes; and Citizen Jake implicates MDL's own positionality (through his protagonist) in a narrative of historical revisionism, political corruption

8 *Bayani* (hero) is the root word; the *-ng* in *bayaning* is a suffix to turn the 'Third World' into a descriptive qualifier of Bayani.

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and bourgeois guilt. These films render the paths taken by MDL impassable and raise the bar of independence impossibly high, even for himself. This makes MDL not so much a model for new independent cinema, but a looming figure that perennially challenges.

In the documentary Chambre 666 (1982), German director Wim Wenders asks filmmakers from different countries, during the 1982 Cannes Film Festival, to sit in a hotel room, before a camera, and speculate on the future of cinema. The young MDL was then exhibiting Kisapmata and Batch '81 at the Directors' Fortnight. The following year, he would go on to make Signos. In his brief appearance in Chambre 666, MDL makes the claim that the future of Philippine film is inextricably linked with the future of the Philippines itself. This epigrammatic statement expresses well the trajectory that MDL's cinema has taken, for it encapsulates the related and parallel histories of political struggle and filmmaking in the Philippines.

In his oeuvre, MDL has posed a lofty challenge, sometimes accusing and all the time demanding, continually daring the cinema that imagines itself as a national cinema. The challenge comes in the form of intense self-discipline in crafting the perfect film at all costs, as well as in the form of onerous provocations that call the bluff of any celebration made in the name of Philippine (cinema) history. In the 1970s, he found a tentative place for him to stand and speak. Even then, he drove himself by the need to reconceive his cinema in each film, going past old answers into new questions every time. The combination of his restlessness and intensity defined the flourishing of his cinema in the early 1980s, which edged into new territories along with what seemed like a forthcoming social revolution. Throughout the decade, he was fearless and constant in cinematically confronting the contingencies of and exacting meaning from (film) history, impelling it, arguing with it, damning it. The weight of MDL's idea of the oneness of cinema and the Philippine nation and the challenging questions he has posed are significantly borne by MDL himself and is marked by his struggle against silence.

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Section 3

Popular Pleasures

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Introduction: Popular Pleasures

Thomas Barker

By the 1960s important shifts were happening across the film industries of Southeast Asia affected by both domestic forces and changes in the international film market. The 1950s 'golden eras' came to an end, marked by a shift from a studio system to a free market comprising new independent film producers. These producers would develop new ways of targeting popular audiences and thereby create new kinds of genres, including action, horror, romance and comedies, often echoing production patterns from major film centres such as the United States, Italy, Japan and Hong Kong. In content and form these films were very different to those of the studio eras or as imagined by the idealist and artistic directors in the previous section.

While popular cinema is often dismissed or overlooked in national film histories, such films offer important reflections and debates that link the common experiences across Southeast Asia. Targeting wide audiences, popular films were responding to social changes, including increased economic and infrastructure development, the rise of strongmen leaders such as Marcos, Suharto and Lee, the formation of the middle class, as well as developments in global cinema such as the rise of the Hollywood blockbuster.

As Sebastiampillai notes (this volume, Chapter 10), Philippines star Nora Aunor encapsulated this shift between eras. Starting her career as a creation of the dying studio era in the late 1960s, acting in 'love team' films in soppy musical romances, by the late 1970s she would emerge as an icon of the new independent cinema in the Philippines. Always a people's heroine, Nora Aunor's characters spoke to ordinary people about their dreams and aspirations. In Indonesia, the popular actress Suzzanna underwent a similar transition into the 1970s into roles in new urban dramas and as an icon of horror cinema. Modernization brought with it changes to the roles of women and ideas of feminism, challenging existing gender norms, as more women moved into the workforce and public sphere. Many films depicted the social contestation as women characters sought to escape traditional roles and assert their presence in the public sphere whether as the transnational crime fighter Cleopatra Wong (as discussed in Siddique, this volume, Chapter 12) or Nora Aunor's role as the suffering woman in HIMALA (Ishmael Bernal, 1982).

New independent producers would also respond by emulating and imitating the popular cinema coming out of Hong Kong and Hollywood to create

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new images for domestic mass entertainment. These efforts would result in a slew of copycat titles such as Bruce Lee imitator ('Brucesploitation') films Ring of Fury (Tony Yeow and James Sebastian, 1973) in Singapore and They Call Him Chop Suey (Jun Gallardo, 1975) in the Philippines, James Bond rip-offs such as the Weng-Weng films (For Y'ur Height Only, Eddie Nicart, 1981) in the Philippines or Mat Bond (Mat Sentul, 1967) in Malaysia, or as Sophie Siddique shows, an ASEAN version of Cleopatra Jones (Jack Starrett, 1973) in the figure of Cleopatra Wong (Siddique, this volume, Chapter 12). As Barker and Imanjaya demonstrate (this volume, Chapter 11), this trend would continue in Indonesia in the 1980s in titles such as the Rambo-inspired Pembalasan Rambu (The Intruder, Jopi Burnama, 1986). As with the 1950s in Philippines when *komiks* were a source of material for the studios (see Arriola, this volume, Chapter 2), comics and pulp fiction would continue to be material for this popular cinema.

By the 1980s under the influence of economic development and urbanization, new character-driven series would also emerge as a kind of national type. He (invariably he) would be an 'everyman' character, representative of the new kinds of mobility, challenges and experiences of modern life. In Thailand, as Sasinee Khuankaew details (this volume, Chapter 13), Boonchu was the country-boy-made-good, always cheerful and helpful, and a figure articulating the now complicated relationship between the urban and the rural in this context of rapid modernization. In Indonesia, series such as Si Doel Anak Betawi (1972) (see Hanan and Soehadi, this volume, Chapter 6), trendy Catatan Si Boy (Nasri Cheppy, 1986), and Lupus (Achiel Nasrun, 1987), had the titular character pursuing education amongst a rapidly changing urban environment. The same period saw comedies about working-class Malay men from the village negotiating the city, starring comedian Badul (Hantu Siang [Day Ghost], A.R. Badul, 1986) or Azmil Mustapha (Ali Setan, Jins Shamsuddin, 1985) in Malaysia.

By the 1990s, unsustainable economic models and financialization contributed to and exacerbated the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998, marking economic, political and social shifts in the countries of Southeast Asia. This volume ends at 1997 with television firmly entrenched across the region and a transition to a new cinema backed by digital technologies of production. It would leave behind older technologies such as celluloid, videocassette (VHS) and the stand-alone cinemas, making way for multiplexes and digital collaboration, distribution and exhibition.

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10 Nora Aunor vs Ferdinand Marcos

Popular Youth Films of 1970s Philippine Cinema

Chrishandra Sebastiampillai

Abstract
This chapter examines how Philippine actress Nora Aunor's potentially subversive star image was tempered into a safer expression of permissible freedom that also promoted forms of desirable behaviour and values in the 1970s. Such an image functioned to inhibit social and political dissent, indicating how popular films responded to President Ferdinand Marcos's regulation of Philippine cinema during the martial law era. The chapter discusses the role of the studio in ensuring compliance by instituting complementary policies that shaped popular star images and film production. Hierarchies of power and submission were reinforced through Aunor's persona in films that appealed to the lower classes, encouraging noble suffering and acceptance of one's fate.

Keywords: Nora Aunor, Ferdinand Marcos, authoritarianism, youth, Philippine cinema

Introduction

Actress Nora Aunor fan Nestor de Guzman says there were two reasons large crowds could be seen on the streets of the Philippines in the early 1970s: student demonstrations against President Ferdinand Marcos and Aunor's fans headed out to watch her latest film (Llanes 2008). As 1970 began, Aunor and Marcos took very different paths. For Aunor, 1970 was a fruitful year, yielding eighteen films produced by two different studios (Flores 2001, p. 214). For Marcos, a supposedly triumphant 1969 re-election – the nation's first second consecutive term for a president – descended into a chaotic three months known as the First Quarter Storm (Brillantes 1987). While the key

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to Aunor's success was her youthful appeal to the poor masses, the root of Marcos's troubles were also the youth and poor masses, specifically in the form of disenfranchised labourers and farmers reeling from the Philippines's debt and inflation brought about as a direct result of Marcos's expensive campaign for re-election the year before (Celoza 1997). The First Quarter Storm refers to the series of 'demonstrations, rallies and strikes spearheaded by the student movement' and joined by workers and farmers during the opening months of 1970 that resulted in the injury and the death of several students over the course of the year (Brillantes 1987, pp. 47-48). Subsequent rallies received international coverage in the *New York Times* and hardened the government and police against the youths, whom Marcos described as 'alienated rioting young intellectuals' organizing teach-ins and other public speeches, regularly taking to the streets in defiance of the government and the police, inspired in part by deteriorating economic and political conditions in the Philippines and globally by the youth revolution of the 1960s (Celoza 1997, p. 2).

Nora Aunor was an unlikely and unprecedented Filipino star, attaining fame through the merit of her vocal talent at the age of fourteen despite being among the poor of the Philippines, a demographic that was not represented in leading roles in cinema at the time. Vicente Rafael characterizes the Philippines during this period as shifting away from a long-held system of patronage towards an expanding capitalist market, with a breakdown in the patron-client ties of Philippine society (2000, pp. 139-141). The resultant lingering longing for hierarchy (ibid., p. 140) continued to bind the elite and the dependent poor in a relationship that Aunor's films depicted as a benign hierarchy of mutual benefit, and one that Marcos would exploit to his advantage.

In theory, Aunor represented a dangerous cross-section of dissent – the poor masses (farmers and labourers) and the youth (student revolutionaries) whom she could mobilize in large numbers. Knowing this, Marcos sought the support of Aunor in 1971: his wife Imelda offering Aunor the chance to live at Malacañang Palace (the official residence of the president) and study with their children (Lim 2012, pp. 196-197). Aware of the dangers of overt support, Aunor declined, saying that it would be 'tricky' to accept (Kalaw 1971, p. 29, cited in Lim 2012, p. 197). Ultimately, the student protestors and Aunor did not intersect; while Aunor appealed to the youth, it was a specific youth – the lower class of which she was a member. The students of the universities in the capital were more interested in consuming popular culture in English, seeing foreign films as containing a degree of quality that local Tagalog films lacked (Lacaba 1970). During this era (and still in the present), fluent English was a clear marker of the educated and upper

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class. The poor and common people were referred to colloquially as the '*bakya*,' loosely translated as 'the tacky crowd' (Lacaba 1970). If foreign films were the definition of quality films, then Aunor was the queen of the *bakya* crowd, and her films spoke directly to them.

This chapter will examine how Aunor's potentially subversive star image was tempered into a safe expression of the freedoms permitted by authorities during this period. It will examine how the popular films that mirrored official policy governing film production during the era became a means of promoting desirable behaviour and values that simultaneously inhibited dissent. The chapter also discusses the role of the studio in facilitating compliance through complementary organizational policies that shaped popular star images and film production. It will therefore demonstrate how hierarchies of power and submission were reinforced through Aunor's persona and films, particularly those of family, employment and social class as they pertained to the youth and the lower class, encouraging a form of noble suffering and the general acceptance of one's fate. Finally, the chapter will also dispute the dismissal of the teenage jukebox musical as mass-produced low culture, interrogating it as a site of the relationship between the star image, the popular film industry and the authoritarianism that characterized martial law in the Philippines.

Aunor, Class, Ethnicity and the Teenage Jukebox Musical

Aunor's distinguishing feature as well as the root of her potentially subversive image was her general difference to the existing model of stardom in the Philippines at this time (Tadiar 2002, p. 712). Prior Filipino stars were prized for both their beauty and larger-than-life personas. Beauty in this context was defined by a colonial fixation on whiteness, resulting in stars that were *mestizo* (mixed ethnicity), tall, with sharp features and a corresponding general air of cultural sophistication (Tiongson 2008, pp. 266-267). In contrast, Aunor stood under 5 feet tall, with *kayumanggi* (brown) skin and ordinary features, and came from a poor background, selling water by the train tracks in her home province to help feed her family (Lim 2015, p. 178). Aunor's star persona is rooted in a Filipino variation of the American Dream – the idea that with hard work and talent, anyone can become a star (Dyer 2004). She therefore embodies the Cinderella rags-to-riches narrative, overcoming poverty and becoming the success story and champion of the masses she represented. Several fan accounts cite Aunor as a powerful figure of identification for the masses who had yet to see someone who looked like

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them and who came from a background like them on the screen in anything other than roles as extras or comic relief (Realuyo 2014; Montemayor 2014).

In the 1970s, the early use of Aunor's star persona in popular cinema was in keeping with this 'dream.' Her films were a form of wish fulfilment and escapism that previous films and stars were unable to offer. Several of her early films consisted of Aunor competing in and winning an amateur singing contest or being in a studio as a main plot point. These were semi-biographical films that celebrated the moment of her attaining success, security and fame after a life of being nobody and nothing in a vast crowd of the same. Her later work with the auteurs of Philippine cinema would use her persona differently, linking her to an indigenous and fanatical quasi-religious worship. But the roots of that fanatical following and the enthroning of this otherwise 'sacred' image lie in her earlier commercial work, tailored to appeal precisely to the young and the masses through the celebration of song and drama of deliverance, all key features in Philippine literature, art and Catholicism (Tiongson 2008).

Aunor emerged in Philippine cinema between its two golden periods. In the 1950s, the golden age of Philippine cinema yielded about 350 films a year (see Arriola on the studio *komiks* film adaptations, this volume, Chapter 2), yet after this period the film industry entered a period of decline (Almajose and Ramos 2013, p. 1). While the 'big three' studios, LVN, Sampaguita and Premiere (some sources prefer the 'big four' and include Lebran) along with iconic Filipino directors such as Manuel Conde, Lamberto Avellana and Gerardo de León produced distinguished work, such films fizzled out in the 1960s and gave way to local versions of popular foreign films such as the secret agent film (see Barker and Imanjaya, this volume, Chapter 11; Siddique, this volume, Chapter 12), the Philippine Western and martial arts films (Lumbera 2011, p. 10). Superstars such as Fernando Poe Jr (and later Aunor in the 1970s) broke away from their studios and set up their own production companies, leading the way for smaller outfits to emerge.

The 1960s also marked the rise of the *bomba* or pornographic film, chiefly consisting of 'melodrama heavily laced with sex' (Lumbera 2011, p. 12), a period which noted academic, critic and National Artist Lumbera characterizes as consisting of 'Rampant Commercialism and Artistic Decline' (Lumbera 2011, p. 39). It was into this backdrop of tumultuous political times, international youth revolution and waning cinematic brilliance that Aunor emerged in the late 1960s, riding on a genre specifically marketed towards youth – the 'jukebox musical,' a genre heavily derided by Filipino academics as being mass-produced low culture (Lumbera 2011, p. 40). Indeed, Lumbera again writes that the genre consisted of 'flimsy narrative [...] employed for the sole purpose of stringing

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together musical numbers performed by teenage pop singers glamorized by television and the recording industry' (Lumbera 2011, p. 40).

Lumbera's scathing description of the popular genre is characteristic of academic writing on the era's popular cinema in the Philippines (as well as a general dismissive attitude towards popular culture from scholars and critics worldwide). Philippine scholars and critics generally prefer films with critical social commentary plots rather than popular cinema (see Campos, this volume, Chapter 9). Academic writing on Aunor examines her work in auteur cinema, her disruption of the industry's preference for *mestizas*, and her devoted fan following, though little work has addressed her early films in detail (Tadiar 2002; Lim 2012; Lim 2015; Flores 2001). Such an absence is symptomatic of general frustration towards the tumultuous political climate of this era and the tendency of popular cinema to avoid topics critical of the establishment and the Marcos regime. However, in dismissing popular genre films, certain assumptions are made, including that its stars and films are inferior because they are linked to the television and recording industry, both mass mediums that supposedly resulted in inferior films, and that an era that saw record ticket sales from Aunor's popularity, was actually a 'low point' between golden eras and not worthy of study.

Indeed, to Lumbera, the 'jukebox musical' represented the degeneration of the musical into a television variety show passing itself off as a feature film (Lumbera 2011, p. 20). To its audience, the jukebox musical combined a love for singing and drama as well as a new national obsession with a young woman who looked like them (Realuyo 2014). In 1970 alone, Aunor made eighteen of these films working with multiple studios and shooting concurrently to feed the demand that the studios recognized. Guy and Pip (German Moreno, 1971) ran for six months, earning an unprecedented US$1.24 million gross (Santos 2009).

Examination of Aunor's early teenage films demonstrates the relationship between popular entertainment and the authorities during a time when the president claimed to be acting in the interest of the working class but in fact used popular media to keep the masses under control. It also fundamentally outlines how the popular self-regulates via the studios and a hierarchy that ultimately resembles a familial structure, in which elders and superiors set and police acceptable behaviour. Finally, such analysis demonstrates how the image of a teenage girl from the provinces singing love songs during a time of political and social unrest is forever linked with the rule of a middle-aged man who would turn dictator. Both images dominated the national media simultaneously during this period, with Aunor cast in roles of submission, while Marcos legislated and enforced submission.

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Illustration 10.1 Aunor performing onstage for The Nora Aunor Show (1968-1971)

Image courtesy of Nestor de Guzman (personal collection)

Marcos's New Society and Cinema

Aunor's star image and her films were heavily connected to the various influences enacted upon cinema at the time by the Marcos regime. Indeed, Marcos's New Society sought to clamp down on the heretical potential of Aunor's image and popularity in the early 1970s along with her mass

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following (Tadiar 2002, p. 719). Writing on Aunor's later work as one of the faces of the auteur films of the second golden age of Philippine cinema, Tadiar addresses the unprecedented popularity of Aunor, arguing that her stardom contained a heretical potential in films such as HIMALA (Ishmael Bernal, 1982). Tadiar further connects Aunor's rise in popularity to the labour movement of the era, with Aunor becoming emblematic of the 'social ferment' that martial law was designed to halt (2002, p. 727). Indeed, Aunor's feminine image came at the end of a decade dominated by male superstars and popular action films and was also very much opposed to the strong masculine image projected as part of Marcos's initially popular presidency (ibid.). In contrast to Aunor, Marcos was a 55-year-old statesman – a charismatic, erudite and brilliant lawyer from a Chinese mestizo political family in Ilocos Norte who seemed to tower over the masses rather than standing with them (Tan 1986).

Proclamation No. 1081, announced on 23 September 1972, effectively declared martial law and kept Marcos in power for a further fourteen years. One vital means to maintain such power was the media, regulated by the introduction of several new policies geared at censorship and the promotion of the New Society. The New Society was a direct response to the tumult of the preceding two years and sought to address the 'sick society' Marcos perceived in the Philippines. The official slogan of the New Society movement was '*Sa ikauunlad ng bayan, disiplina ang kailangan*' ('For the nation to progress there must be discipline'). Among the values he pushed for was 'the primacy of personal connections, the importance of maintaining in-group harmony and coherence,' and a spirit of self-sacrifice (Dolan and the Library of Congress 1993, pp. 52-53). These are key themes of popular cinema during the time and can be seen in each Aunor film discussed in this chapter. Indeed, Aunor's characters invariably prioritize close relationships and maintain a good connection with peers, while a strong self-sacrificing nature preserves these ties despite great personal cost and suffering.

In regulating the film industry, Marcos took two main measures. The first was to require that a complete script be submitted to the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP) before commencing production and the second was to issue Letter of Instruction No. 13 (on 29 September 1972, just six days after declaring martial law), which contained a list of seven guidelines the BCMP should follow to ban certain films. The first measure, while obviously a means to censor unwanted content, was also a blessing in disguise for the Philippine film industry because it forced filmmakers to put effort into the writing of a screenplay, an uncommon practice at the

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time (Lumbera 2011, p. 12). It brought an infusion of writing talent from other backgrounds, such as literature and the theatre, giving Philippine cinema a welcome boost of creativity which in turn helped spark the second golden age of Philippine cinema (Lumbera 2011, p. 12). The second measure was a list of instructions designed to 'safeguard the morality of our society, particularly the youth, against the negative influence of certain motion pictures' (Government of the Philippines 1972). The intended effect of this policy was to block unwanted content from the public, but also to guide studios in their production of films, thus regulating future content and promoting the desired values of Marcos's New Society. The seven guidelines were as follows:

1 Films which tend to incite subversion, insurrection or rebellion against the State;
2 Films which tend to undermine the faith and confidence of the people in their government and/or duly constituted authorities;
3 Films which glorify criminals or condone crimes;
4 Films which serve no other purpose but to satisfy the market for violence or pornography;
5 Films which offend any race or religion;
6 Films which tend to abet the traffic in and use of prohibited drugs;
7 Films contrary to law, public order, morals, good customs, established policies, lawful orders, decrees or edicts; and any or all films which in the judgement of the Board are similarly objectionable and contrary to the letter and spirit of Proclamation No. 1081.

The fourth guideline directly involved the *bomba* industry and would supposedly regulate it, though *bomba* films circumvented this limitation by morphing into the 'bold film' and continued to survive beyond martial law in various permutations (see Tolentino 2001). The first, second and seventh targeted the 'unruly students and intellectuals' Marcos condemned, and sought to prevent subversive films from being screened. And the third and sixth directly related to criminal activity and the prevention of it from being portrayed in a 'glorified' manner. As a result, Philippine cinema was closely bound to these regulations, with films going through gatekeepers first in pre-production at the scriptwriting stage, and again prior to being released. Aunor's teenage films of the era were compliant with these regulations, both before the regulation was passed and after, suggesting that the industry was already self-regulating compatibly with Marcos's New Society to reinforce hierarchies of power within society and the family.

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Aunor as the 'Good Youth'

Close examination of Aunor's films further highlights such compliance. Several of Aunor's early films follow a narrative in which the character succeeds against the odds, with themes of escaping poverty through hard work, being a dutiful and filial daughter, piety, being respectful to superiors and being of noble character in the face of hardship. In The Young at Heart (Danny Holmsen, 1970) and Young Love (Tony Cayado, 1970), Aunor's role is that of the semi-biographical talent contestant on a television show, while in Guy and Pip she is a singer and actress shooting a film on a studio set. In Young Love Aunor is a poor orphan whose salvation comes from the noble studio boss who imparts advice and grooms her for success. In contrast, her character's trials stem from the guardian figure in her life who, through jealousy and sheer malice, does everything in her power to prevent Aunor's character from achieving success and liberty. The guardian beats, berates and even imprisons Aunor to prevent her from attending the final life-changing competition. In this scenario, there are two forms of authority: good authority in the form of the studio boss who is nurturing and transformative, and bad authority in the form of the tyrannical guardian, a caricature of evil. In the absence of biological parents, the studio boss is a calm, kind man who takes on the role of parent and offers opportunities and liberty, recommending and advancing cash for the purchase of a new wardrobe to suit her needs for the contest. In Guy and Pip, other rival superiors in terms of class – the studio boss's children – conspire to keep her apart from her true love and co-star because of jealousy and romantic rivalry.

Thus, class plays a role in the obstacles that Aunor's characters face, with clear distinctions being made between good authority and bad. The distinction between the two is admittedly a smokescreen for the ultimate message it contains – respect authority. Even in the cruellest taunt from her guardian, Aunor's character remains respectful and filial, accepting suffering at the hands of her superiors as her fate. 'Authority is oppressive' is a potentially subversive message, but it is negated by the existence of 'good' superiors. This converts the message instead to 'There are noble superiors and wicked superiors, but if you are of noble character, you will be saved.' Aunor's films are also about the tension between youth and their more immediate authority – parents. Parents are not always uncomplicatedly good characters in the narrative, and sometimes serve as the catalyst for a teenage character's search for a nurturing parental or authority figure. This can come in the form of a benevolent employer or some other noble benefactor that acts in the teenager's best interests, replicating the old

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system of patronage in Philippine society. Aunor's characters chiefly battle poverty, class inequality and abuse, but in all those scenarios, she remains passive, patient and accepting of her fate. This patient suffering, dubbed 'sufferance' by Patrick Flores, characterizes much of Aunor's work and persona (2001).

The theme of suffering is a key feature of Philippine popular art forms, and is one of Tiongson's 'four values' in Filipino drama and film, '*mabuti ang inaapi*' ('the oppressed are virtuous'), enthroning suffering and submissiveness, a trope born of the Spanish and American colonial regimes and replicated in contemporary cinema (Tiongson 2008, p. 272). Tiongson (a leading scholar and critic of Philippine arts and culture that includes film, theatre and literature) notes that Aunor followed in a tradition of suffering heroines (ibid., p. 273). Aunor's characters often espouse a respect for superiors and eventually lead co-stars and a supporting cast towards a better relationship with their parents and society. In Guy and Pip, both the studio boss's children and her co-star descend into vices such as promiscuous behaviour, drinking and smoking. Aunor serves as a steadying influence in the case of her co-star, reforming him and repairing his relationship with his mother while the offspring of the studio boss serve as a cautionary tale for the audience. The pattern is also seen in The Young at Heart in which Aunor is a role model for good behaviour while her female co-star demonstrates the tragedy of being isolated from one's parents (who are in fact desperately searching for her after she left home unannounced after a misunderstanding).

A particularly significant film that incorporates the new industrial regulations introduced after the declaration of martial law is My Little Brown Girl (Danny Holmsen, 1972). The film adheres to many of Marcos's ideals for his New Society, such as the importance of maintaining in-group harmony and coherence as well as self-sacrifice, and it deals directly with the criminal and drug prohibition of the Letter of Instruction No. 13. The film also reproduces authoritarian hierarchies of class, power and submission in the persona of Aunor and the characters in the film. Aunor plays Marita, a teenage vendor from the province who dreams of going to Manila. She arrives at the Morgan household as a maid and settles in well with the teenage son, Henry (who is her age), his younger sister and the senior domestic helpers of the house. Her two sources of conflict are Henry's mother, who abuses Marita, and a second maid of the same age who is jealous of Marita. Henry is the representation of everything that is wrong with the upper-class youth of Manila – fallen to vice and prone to rebellious behaviour. He dresses fashionably, curses in English and sings in a rock band with barefoot girls

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stripping him of his shirt and leading him away. All around the smoky club are semi-naked young people publicly kissing each other in the darkness punctuated by strobe lights. This is not the extent of Henry's vices: aside from drinking and smoking, he is also addicted to drugs.

His mother refuses to address the issue, citing the flood of shame that would happen if the knowledge that her son is a drug addict becomes public. It is Henry's elderly *yaya* or nanny that convinces her to allow him to be placed in a rehabilitation centre, and subsequently to convalesce in the province in anonymity and away from the temptation that Manila brings. In this context, the poor *yaya* and the province are portrayed as being more loving and wholesome than his high society mother in Manila. Drugs are also portrayed as a big city and upper-class problem – a vice of privilege and boredom. With Henry safely reformed in the province, he falls in love with both the lifestyle and Marita, who has been caring for him there. Upon returning, Henry announces his intention to marry Marita, which enrages his mother. That night, his mother is murdered, and he discovers Marita by her corpse screaming and clutching the bloody knife.

The third act of the film consists of a courtroom drama with Marita on trial and Henry believing she had committed the crime. The crime is revealed by the *yaya* to have been committed by the jealous maid, rival to Marita for Henry's affections. She is depicted as a person twisted by her desire to fit in with the Manila upper class with her permed hair and short uniform (that exposes her behind to men whom she attempts to seduce). The crime was committed for Henry's mother's jewellery, another signifier of the wealth and class she coveted. The characters can be summarized thus: the Morgan family is rich, arrogant and engage in vices and modern behaviour condemned as being Western and un-Filipino. The son changes with the help of his noble *yaya* and the wholesome life of the countryside. The mother remains unchanged and dies at the hands of a servant who despised her. Marita and the *yaya* are the noble poor, passive and accepting of suffering and social hierarchy, capable of bringing salvation to their loved ones. The other maid is held up as an example of the dangers of seeking modernity and status symbols while rejecting her fellow workers. Not only has she committed murder, but she has murdered her superior in a clear position of authority over her, albeit tyrannical. The maid's character is the exact opposite of Aunor's. Where Aunor accepts suffering and punishment as her fate, the maid steals from and kills her oppressor. Where Aunor is a simple and good country girl – called the titular 'my little brown girl' by Henry, the maid is devious, puts on airs and wants to be equal to her superiors. The film thus forms a morality tale cautioning youth against drugs and emphasizing

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that crime and unruliness as signified by the maid who murdered her employer are swiftly punished by the law and condemned by society.

In this manner, Aunor serves more as a passive example of virtue reinforcing authority and the accepted norms and values of this era, a position that is very different to the subversive figure she became for auteurs in the second golden age of Philippine cinema. In this earlier youthful quest for identity formation, Aunor's characters and indeed her star persona repeatedly behave respectfully, submissively and in an exemplary manner. Freedom is encouraged, though within accepted parameters, a powerlessness that also mirrors Aunor's own position as an actress at this time. At only sixteen years old, Aunor became the subject of a tussle between studios and her guardians, all of which were vying for her exclusive labour and the gold mine this represented. Aunor's mother had earlier appointed her aunt as Aunor's legal guardian and a struggle was in process between the sisters over control of the star. The studio that ultimately won the legal case was Sampaguita, a major studio that was linked to the Marcos administration over the years. Sampaguita produced films that mythologized the Marcos family during the crucial election periods, including Iginuhit ng Tadhana: The Ferdinand E. Marcos Story (Carved by Destiny, Conrado Conde and Jose De Villa) in 1965 and Pinagbuklod ng Langit (Heaven's Fate, Eddie Garcia) in 1969, while the daughter of Sampaguita's owner, 'Marichu' Vera-Perez Maceda, was a member of Imelda's high-society 'Blue Ladies' circle of influential friends (David 2008, p. 230). It was in the interests of Sampaguita to promote a version of youth that was acceptable to the establishment, and one very much in contrast with the 'rioting students' Marcos denounced on the streets.

The Studio and Compliance

The Sampaguita studio carefully preserved Aunor's *bida* (heroine) image, emphasizing her good values and behaviour both on-screen and off. The studio's implicit support of Marcos had ensured that the organization made films that already upheld and reflected respect for authority and order before the imposition of martial law and the directives that demanded compliance. Indeed, a strong moral agenda was set by the studio in their filmmaking decisions and production, with the popular being used to promote submissive obedience through stars and films.

Sampaguita's creative direction and values were helmed by its boss, Dr Jose Perez, whose daughter Marichu Vera-Perez Maceda was interviewed for

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a book on the golden era of Philippine cinema. In the book, she details the 'morality clause' that ensures films were driven by clearly distinguishable good and bad characters. 'My father and my family believe in black and white. White denotes good; black denotes bad; and always, good triumphs over evil, white over black. […] [T]here is no room for any shade of grey because that will be confusing to the simple minds of film viewers' (Almajose and Ramos 2013, p. 8). This simplification of characterization meant that there were clear villains and heroes, and Aunor's films perfectly demonstrate this binary. It also illustrates a patronizing attitude taken by the studio towards its audience, feeding them appropriate values and films that assume that the audience are incapable of following complex plots or reasoning for themselves, replicating the authoritarianism that Marcos ruled the Philippines with during martial law.

The book also lists seven film production taboos that closely resemble the seven guidelines listed in the Letter of Instruction No. 13. Specifically, these prohibit pornographic and sexual acts; hatred for any cultural or ethnic group; glorifying villains, crime, drugs and violence; and inciting subversion, rebellion or sedition against the state (Almajose and Ramos 2013, p. 9). It also adds an important taboo that is clearly reflected in Aunor's early films: disrespect for parents and the elderly. In this manner, Sampaguita cast its prize star as a *bida* in films that preserved authority and schooled the youth in the values of the New Society in the 1970s. These guidelines meant that Sampaguita's output of films were affirmative of the New Society, with their stable of teenage stars working to reproduce its values within the studio and in their films.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the Philippine state in the 1970s used the media to respect and legitimize its authoritarian rule through restrictive censorship policies and filmmaking guidelines, as well as the co-operation of filmmakers who internalized these policies into their studio operations. Such influence affected areas as diverse as script writing and star management, and in particular can be recognized in the star image of the popular actress Aunor. Aunor's early 1970s films address the paradoxical tensions between the persons and values represented by Marcos and Aunor. Aunor was the local face of the worldwide youth revolution, taking over the screen from stars that represented the establishment – fair, larger-than-life and sophisticated. In their place, she represented Filipino youth – uncertain, exploring and respectful of authority.

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The figure of Marcos in contrast represented the old guard threatened by the youth – the *mestizo* establishment figure seeking to impose order to restrain the young, whom he perceived as threatening order. The early 1970s marked an era of push and pull between freedom and increasing authoritarian rule, culminating in the institution of martial law in 1972, a defining moment for the Philippines and its cinema in the fourteen years to follow.

In this period Aunor's characters functioned as representations of the 'good youth' – respectful of authority, noble of character and free within acceptable limits, all in contrast with the 'bad youth' who fall victims to vice and reject the authority of parents and superiors. Aunor's teenage films explore the conflict between personal liberty and authority central to the teenage films of the era, advocating a respectful liberty and honouring of traditional values of submissiveness and obedience. Such films walk a fine line between realistic and relatable plots and characters that would appeal to a lower-class provincial audience while also maintaining the status quo of class hierarchies without inciting revolt during this politically tense era. Consequently, Aunor's films often depict her character's mistreatment at the hands of evil caricatures and the eventual triumph of justice when she is rescued by benevolent authority figures. Such a narrative prevents superiors from being viewed as inherently evil, instead this largely benevolent system is seen to always eventually reward the compliant and the noble of heart.

However, Aunor is also a unique and paradoxical figure in Philippine cinema. Aunor's star persona evolved to make her representative of both stages – first the compliant, good youth, and later the subversive female figure of the second golden age of Philippine cinema. This period featured celebrated auteur directors including Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Celso Ad. Castillo, Mario O'Hara, Peque Gallaga and Mike de Leon (see Campos, this volume, Chapter 9), some of whom Aunor would work with. In the critically acclaimed films that followed her success in the teenage jukebox musical, Aunor went on to star in Minsa'y Isang Gamu-Gamo (Once a Moth, Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara, 1976), a film that condemned the continued American military presence and its attendant abuses in the Philippines. Her iconic character in Himala, Elsa, challenged political and religious authority with a feminine power that threatened patriarchal authority and invoked her fanatical following from her early teenage fame. Aunor herself remained publicly neutral during this period until she overtly supported Marcos during a snap election at the age of 33 in 1986 shortly before the People's Power Revolution that would end his presidency, dividing her fans and damaging her popularity (Tadiar 2002, p. 712). In the 1990s, she portrayed the suffering 'overseas Filipino worker,' a figure she is associated with through

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her background of poverty that snaps under the abuse of her Singaporean employers in The Flor Contemplacion Story (Joel Lamangan, 1995). Aunor remains active in Philippine independent cinema and now stars in the social commentary films that her early detractors initially criticized her work in the teenage jukebox musical genre for pre-empting.

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About the Author

Chrishandra Sebastiampillai is a film scholar and lecturer in Malaysia. Her doctoral thesis explores popular Philippine cinema in the 1970s, an interest she first explored in her honours thesis on screen couples and stardom in contemporary Philippine cinema.

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11 Transnational Exploitation Cinema in Southeast Asia

The Cases of Indonesia and the Philippines

Thomas Barker and Ekky Imanjaya

Abstract
Under authoritarian rule, Indonesia and the Philippines developed production systems to facilitate the export of films to the global exploitation and B-grade markets. Framed by the colonial relationship with the United States, independent Filipino producers in the 1950s began working with mostly American partners on diverse low-cost titles. By the 1970s, the Philippines had become the choice location for many foreign co-productions. In Indonesia in the early 1980s, a group of local producers similarly pursued exploitation production for global export as a means to generate income. Production in both countries is framed by the Manila International Film Festivals (1982-1983), which marked Imelda Marcos's attempt to formalize the co-production industry and make Southeast Asia a new hub for co-production and export.

Keywords: exploitation cinema, co-productions, Indonesian cinema, Philippine cinema, export

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes are often characterized by their repression of creative and artistic work and the forms of resistance and critique that such repression engenders in the work of artists and filmmakers. The repressive regimes of Marcos in the Philippines (1965-1986) and Suharto in Indonesia (1966-1998) are no exception to this model, and many studies of film in this period have been framed in this way (Sen 1995; Yeatter 2007, p. 129). In

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this chapter we describe an alternative paradigm of cinematic production under authoritarianism, namely exploitation cinema intended for the global market. By tracing the respective histories of exploitation production and export in both countries, this chapter shows how they came to supply these markets despite differing histories and modes of production.

We trace the Philippines film connection to the United States, which extends back before World War II and which established the conditions and contacts for an American-Filipino co-production industry to form. In the Philippines, three local director-producers (Cirio Santiago, Gerry de León and Eddie Romero) became important figures mediating between the Philippines as a production location and American producers and distributors. This provided the conditions for the Marcos regime to host the Manila International Film Festival (MIFF) in 1982 and 1983. Indonesian film producers who attended MIFF and saw the potential of the export market subsequently orientated their production and ambitions to supplying the exploitation market. Indonesian exports were driven by the initiative of two business-minded producers (Raam Punjabi and Gope Samtani) who sought out the international market by emulating the prevailing genre standards of content and form. Here, we provide a comparative analysis of efforts in both countries to supply films for the international exploitation market during comparative periods of domestic authoritarian rule.

This orientation towards the American market was no accident: both countries were linked by their Cold War alignment with the United States through a global media system in which Hollywood and the American film market were conceptually and economically dominant.[1] Satisfying the global production and distribution circuits of American feature film production and consumption – with its global links to Europe, Australia, the Middle East, Japan and South America – required Indonesian and Filipino filmmakers to conform to the narrative, generic, aesthetic and cultural forms of American cinema. Simultaneously, they were also able to draw on local traditions of exploitation techniques including provocative titles, bombastic taglines, sexual content and other on-screen spectacles (Espiritu 2018, pp. 86-88; Imanjaya 2016).

While audiences may have realized that some of these films were made in the Philippines or Indonesia, oftentimes the originating country was rendered 'invisible' (Gier 2000, p. 35). The Southeast Asian origins of films such as The Big Doll House (Jack Hill, 1971) (made in the Philippines) and

1 Hong Kong cinema was the other important influence during this period though it seems to have had less influence beyond some ethnic Chinese producers.

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The Intruder (Jopi Burnama, 1986) (made in Indonesia) were obscured by the use of American actors, English titles and English dialogue. As Lim (2002) has also noted, exploitation perpetuated global economic and political disparities between the United States as a dominant partner and the determining market and the "Third World" as locations of low costs, cheap labour and lax safety standards. In these ways both the Philippines and Indonesia became extensions of the American exploitation film industry in their ability to 'contrive Americanness' (Capino 2010, p. 6) while developing their own forms of adaptation, innovation and negotiation.

Exploitation and the Philippines/Indonesian Context

According to David Roche (2015), exploitation is not just a genre, but a mode of production defined by cheap production costs and the pursuit of easy profit. Without large budgets or big stars, producers exploit controversial or topical subject matter, often include content such as violence, gore and nudity that is unsuitable for mainstream audiences, and use gimmicky marketing techniques (Schaefer 1999). In the United States, exploitation cinema operates outside or parallel to the large mainstream studios, relying on secondary distribution and exhibition circuits such as drive-ins, grindhouses, small independent cinemas and home video (VHS) to reach its audiences. In America from the 1930s to the 1950s, exploitation film companies were euphemistically called 'poverty row' (Ray 1991) and were clustered along Gower Street in Los Angeles. By the 1950s and the 1960s, exploitation companies had become a staple part of the American film industry, producing much content as well as importing exotica from other countries, such as Italy and Japan (Ray 1991). By the 1970s exploitation cinema was associated with new forms and subgenres, including blaxploitation and sexploitation, violent and gory horror such as the 'video nasties' phenomena in the UK and imports like Hong Kong kung fu films.

Within the American market and in much scholarship, exploitation films from outside the United States fall within an exotic paradigm due to the foreignness of their content. Such interpretations are found within the work of Daniel Martin (2015), for example, whose book *Extreme Asia* tells the story of Asian cinema from a Western fan perspective by highlighting 'extremeness' in terms of violence and gore, thereby reproducing its cultural otherness. Indonesian and the Philippines exploitation films have similarly fallen within this paradigm (Jones 2005; Taylor 1991). In more recent years,

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studies of exploitation films have followed cult cinema studies based on niche consumption and celebration by audiences in the West.

While in the American context exploitation is contrasted with the big Hollywood studios, in other countries so-called exploitation techniques and content were not so marginalized and were even constitutive of mainstream cinematic forms and practice. For instance, Hong Kong martial arts films from Golden Harvest and Shaw Brothers studios were often made using exploitation techniques but were mainstream viewing for audiences across Asia. Therefore, when American and other producers came to the Philippines or Indonesia, they were able to tap into existing networks of film production that were able to fulfil the requirements of low-budget exploitation feature films.

In Indonesia and Philippines much domestic scholarship positions exploitation and genre cinema as antithetical to the concept of a serious national cinema. For instance, when Eddie Romero was made a National Artist for Cinema in 2003, the committee focused on his Tagalog titles with national significance, ignoring his long contribution to the American-Philippines co-production market.[2] In Indonesia, film history is likewise conceived through the works of nationalist artist-filmmakers (Barker 2019), the antithesis of exploitation and commercial cinema. Exploitation films were seen to denigrate the image of Indonesia overseas and such work is excluded or dismissed in accounts of film history.

By moving away from the cult and national cinema approaches, this chapter is situated within scholarship on transnational cinema which traces the supra-national connections and relationships that produce transnational cinematic connections. In doing so, this chapter follows newer scholarship, such as work by Imanjaya (2009, 2016, 2018) and Barker (2014) on Indonesia, and Lim (2002), Capino (2010), and Leavold (2014) on Filipino exploitation films. We seek to develop a historical analysis of film industry connections between these two Southeast Asian nations, both of which made exploitation films for the global market.

History and Significance of the Philippines to Exploitation Films

When First Lady Imelda Marcos promoted the 1982 MIFF by noting that 'The Philippines is in a strategic position – it is both East and West, right

2 See, for example, 'Order of National Artists: Eddie Romero,' National Commission for Culture and the Arts (http://ncca.gov.ph/about-culture-and-arts/culture-profile/national-artists-of-the-philippines/eddie-s-romero/).

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and left, rich and poor' (Hollie 1982), her words were also reflective of the country's cinematic history. Manila had become a cosmopolitan film centre after the arrival of cinema as mass entertainment. Spanish colonialism shaped the styles and forms of Filipino cinema (Deocampo 2003), with subsequent American colonialism shepherding the arrival of cinematic technology at the beginning of the twentieth century (Deocampo 2017). While Manila flourished as an important trade and cultural centre, other links to Asian production centres, including Shanghai and Singapore, were also evident (Tofighian 2013; Deocampo 2017). After independence in 1946, many relationships continued between the film industries of the Philippines and the United States through individuals, transnational projects, companies, funds, development projects and film trade. While Hollywood studio films dominated the cinemas of the Philippines after World War II, Filipino cinema enjoyed its first golden age and exported films to audiences across the region, including to Hawaii and Indonesia.

For the Americans, the Philippines was a significant site of defeat and then liberation during the Pacific War against imperial Japan. As a result, the Pacific War became a 'sustaining narrative' and a fecund site for filmic representation of American heroism and benevolence (Deocampo 2017, p. 393). The production of American war films began in earnest even before World War II ended with the making of Back to Bataan (Edward Dmytryk, 1945) starring John Wayne, followed soon after by another John Wayne vehicle, They Were Expendable (John Ford, 1945). For Filipinos, these were sympathetic portrayals of their people and their struggles and a number of similarly themed Filipino films followed, including So Long America (Gerry de León, 1946), Apoy sa Langit (Fire in Heaven, Eddie Romero, 1949) and Now and Forever (Rolando del Mar, 1953). These films celebrated the heroism of the American liberators and the brotherhood forged in battle between the two countries (Gier 2000). It marked the emergence of a type of film Capino (2010, p. 6) calls 'Philippine-made American fantasies.'

One American who remained in the Philippines after his naval deployment was Kane Lynn, who became a film producer best known for his company Hemisphere Pictures (Ray 1991, pp. 63-88). Lynn established one of the first post-war co-production companies with Eddie Romero called Lynn-Romero. Together they realized a number of features including The Scavengers (John Cromwell, 1958), Terror Is a Man (Gerardo de León and Eddie Romero, 1959), and the war film The Lost Battalion (Eddie Romero, 1960). Finding little success in the US market with these titles, Hemisphere was formed around 1963, releasing the war films Raiders of Leyte Gulf (Eddie Romero, 1963) and Intramuros aka The Walls of Hell

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(Gerry de León and Eddie Romero, 1964), before switching to horror and exploitation film. Hemisphere became one of the most significant names in Filipino-American exploitation throughout the 1960s.

From the 1960s onwards, other American producers and directors came to the Philippines to shoot a variety of war, exploitation and low-budget features. In the United States, these cheap productions shot in foreign locations are known as 'runaway productions.' American producers sought out the Philippines for its low cost, lax regulations, exotic locales, English-speaking partners, permissive views of nudity and violence and availability of props and extras. American producer Roger Corman used the Philippines as a co-production location and described his workflow in a 1982 speech:

> My method is generally to start with the script. I develop the script myself, and usually, here in Manila, I will put up the script, the director, certain American actors, and a certain amount of money. The 'below-the-line,' or physical aspects of the production, are put up by [...] the Filipino producer. (Corman 2011, p. 113)

Roger Corman, who had been producing low-budget features in the United States, sent protégé director Monte Hellman to the Philippines in 1964 to shoot two films back-to-back – Back Door to Hell (1964) and Flight to Fury (1964) – with actor-writer Jack Nicholson. Corman followed other Americans, including aging American actor George Montgomery, who had turned to directing, shooting three films in the Philippines, including his debut, The Steel Claw (1961). Over the next four decades over a hundred American-Filipino co-productions were shot in the Philippines.

A number of Filipinos developed careers catering to American co-productions, including fixer Vicente Nayve, who helped produce The Steel Claw (Amurao 1967), and Eddie Romero, who became known as Hollywood's 'Man in Manila' (Server and Romero 1999, p. 44). Romero was a skilled writer who entered the film world when his short story 'Ang Maestra' ('The Teacher') was picked up by Gerardo de León for production in 1943.[3] Directing his first feature, Ang Kamay ng Dios (The Hand of God), in 1947, Romero remained on contract with Sampaguita until 1953 as a writer-director. When in Europe with his diplomat father, Romero gained an informal film education by observing first-hand the working styles of David Lean and Roberto Rossellini. More fluent in English than Tagalog,

3 Gerardo 'Gerry' de León, born Gerardo Ilagan, was a member of the famous Ilagan clan in the Philippines motion picture industry.

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Romero found that his English-language ability and international exposure lead him to becoming an obvious partner for American co-productions (Server and Romero 1999).

When the big four Filipino studios began to decline into the 1960s, more independent companies appeared, breaking apart the tight oligopoly over the industry that Sampaguita, Lebran, LVN and Premiere had enjoyed since the 1930s (see Campos, this volume, Chapter 9), allowing more Filipinos to work on co-production projects. One result of this opening up of the film industry was the People's Pictures (Cirio Santiago) production Cavalry Command aka The Day of the Trumpet (Eddie Romero, 1958), a Filipino Western set in 1902 in which an American cavalry brigade is sent to occupy a Filipino village and quell a nearby guerrilla movement. Romero and de León brought over American actors John Agar and Richard Arlen for the lead roles. When Romero was in Los Angeles overseeing post-production, actor Burgess Meredith saw the film and requested to be in Romero's next film. With Burgess, Romero shot the chase thriller Man on the Run aka The Kidnappers (1958), described by its promotional poster as 'a gigantic search [that] uncovers Manila's palaces of pleasure and its hotspots of sin.' Both films were distributed on the exploitation circuits in the United States by Hemisphere Pictures.

Following Man on the Run, Romero and de León began production on Terror Is a Man (Gerry de León, 1959), described as a Filipino version of The Island of Dr Moreau (Voeltz 2011). American actors Richard Derr, Francis Lederer, and Greta Thyssen were brought in to star alongside a Filipino supporting cast. When released in the United States on a double bill with The Scavengers (Eddie Romero, 1959) the film gained little traction.[4] But when it was retitled in 1969 as Blood Creature and released on a double bill, it became a commercial success. As Blood Creature the film became an exemplar of exploitation with its provocative title, gimmicky marketing and bombastic posters (Arena 2011, p. 48). Similarly, de León's earlier film, Kulay Dugo Ang Gabi (Blood Is the Colour of Night, 1964), was retitled for the US exploitation market as The Blood Drinkers in 1966, becoming a double bill sensation with The Black Cat (Harold Hoffman, 1966).[5]

Blood Creature was a prelude to the 'Blood Island' trilogy which established Eddie Romero and Gerry de León as notable producers of exploitation movies and the Philippines as production location. For the first film in the 'Blood Island' trilogy, Brides of Blood (Eddie Romero, 1968), John Ashley

4 The Scavengers was re-released in 1963 as City of Sin by Hemisphere Pictures.

5 It was retitled for a third time as Vampire People (1970).

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was brought over from the United States to play Jim, the American hero of the story. Ashley was a fading B-movie actor who had starred in many American International Pictures (AIP) exploitation films of the 1950s and 1960s. This marked the beginning of a fruitful partnership with Eddie Romero. Ashley returned to the Philippines again to act in and produce the second Blood Island instalment, called The Mad Doctor of Blood Island (Eddie Romero and Gerardo de León, 1969), and he remained in the Philippines where 'he helped open the floodgates for the exploitation film invasion of the Philippines' (Chandler 2015). After making the third Blood Island film – Beast of Blood (Eddie Romero, 1971) for Hemisphere Pictures – Romero and Ashley produced Beast of the Yellow Night (Eddie Romero, 1971), in collaboration with Roger Corman's New World Pictures company. Ashley continued to be an important liaison for American productions throughout the 1970s, including The Big Doll House (Jack Hill, 1971), and the Eddie Romero-directed films The Woman Hunt (1972), The Twilight People (1972), Black Mama White Mama (1973), Savage Sisters (1974) and Beyond Atlantis (1973).

Although exploitation films are routinely criticized for their representations of cruelty, violence and the exploitation of women, the Philippines also played host to furthering progressive themes and representations. The most famous case is actress Pam Grier, who became perhaps the first African American woman to act in lead roles as the heroine in action films. Although remembered best for her lead roles in American-made blaxploitation classics such as Coffy (Jack Hill, 1973) and Foxy Brown (Jack Hill, 1974), her acting career really began in Philippines-made titles such as The Big Doll House and Women in Cages (Gerardo de León, 1971). Although the politics of her image is complicated (Holmlund 2005), Grier's characters rebelled against tyrannical and unjust authority, often challenging established racial hierarchies.

The high point for the Philippines as a co-production location came with the filming of Apocalypse Now (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) which went on to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1980. Apocalypse Now relied on many of the facilities available to exploitation co-productions but became mired in controversy with cost overruns, extravagant requests (including real human corpses and multiple military helicopters) and the near death of lead actor Martin Sheen. Although Eddie Romero is credited as an associate producer on Apocalypse Now, it was his last co-production. By the mid-1970s Romero was already making a return to the Tagalog-language industry, where he would direct some of his most notable works, including Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon? (This Is How We Were Before,

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How Are You Doing Now?, 1976) and Aguila (1979). All this production activity throughout the 1970s and the international exposure gained from Apocalypse Now allowed the Marcos regime to see itself as a new node in the global film industry and prompted the idea that the Philippines could host an international film festival to rival Cannes (Hollie 1982).

The Manila International Film Festival (MIFF)

With more than 40 foreign films shot in the Philippines from 1970 to 1980, the Philippines seemed poised to become a centre of film production and promotion in the Asian region.[6] Capitalizing on this and with the lifting of martial law in 1981, the Marcos regime sought to prove its openness by hosting a glamorous international film festival a year later in January 1982. The festival was to rival Cannes in its glamour, cultural significance and industry importance, seeking to take advantage of the Philippines's geographic and political location between East and West (Hollie 1982). At the insistence of Imelda Marcos, films were to be screened uncensored in order to boost the festival's international appeal (Espiritu 2018, pp. 155-157). While the MIFF has since become an example of Marcos's misfeasance and profligacy,[7] with regime instability and financial problems dooming the MIFF to running only two times, it formalized the Philippines as an international co-production location and provided attendant Indonesian producers with a new perspective on the opportunities in global film markets.

As a trade- and business-focused festival, the MIFF diverged from the general pattern of regional film festivals and projects held prior to 1982. These largely focused upon cultural exchange and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) political integration. Member countries of ASEAN participated in the annual Asian Film Festival (started in 1954) and the

6 A list of foreign films shot in the Philippines can be viewed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_foreign_films_shot_in_the_Philippines.

7 Construction of the Manila Film Center began in haste less than six months before the MIFF was to open. On 17 November, parts of the scaffolding holding the main theatre ceiling collapsed as concrete was being poured, killing up to 169 workers (Esplanada 1992). An enforced media blackout sought to downplay the severity of the accident, claiming that only seven or eight workers had died. Work resumed a week later at an accelerated pace and was completed the day before the opening of the festival. President Marcos remarking unironically in his opening speech that 'I cannot believe that we are actually holding this opening ceremonies [sic] in a building that was finished a few hours back' (Marcos 1982).

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ASEAN Film Festival (started in 1971) to exchange and promote their national cinema within the region.[8] The Asian Film Festival was a product of the Asian Film Producers Association, and was used as a self-promotion tool for producers, also playing a political role as a cultural bulwark against communist influence (Lee 2014), a purpose within which Southeast Asian film festivals had long been entwined since the Cold War (see Ainslie, this volume, Chapter 8). Similarly, the ASEAN Film Festival rotated annually between ASEAN member countries and was a product of the political alliance between member-states, which served to promote film discussion and exchange between member countries. Neither festival had significant ambitions beyond Asia and served to promote 'national cinema' rather than popular, genre film across the region. Intra-Asian distribution was often discussed but did not become a significant form of trade, with films rarely circulating beyond official or showcase screenings or linguistically similar markets, such as Indonesian films entering Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s.

In its organization, screening schedule and guest list the MIFF lived up to its ambitions to be a glamorous, international festival (Hollie 1982). Representatives from Asia, America, Europe and the Middle East participated in the festival and its associated film market. While hosting a strong Western contingent, the MIFF also incorporated Soviet and Chinese films, such as the festival opener The Plum Flower Embroidery (Zhang Liang, 1980). The festival director was John J. Litton, a producer and the Philippines distributor for Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) films, with prominent invited guests including Jack Valenti (president of the MPAA), and actors George Hamilton, Jeremy Irons and Brooke Shields. Indian director Satyajit Ray headed the jury, which awarded the best film prize to the Indian film 36 Chowringhee Lane (Aparna Sen, 1981).

The MIFF also incorporated a film market for filmmakers and distributors. Designed to help Filipino filmmakers sell their films internationally, it also allowed other producers from the region – including Indonesia – to attend and similarly promote and sell their films. One Japanese attendee noted: 'For once we won't have to cross eight time zones to attend a film market' (*Manila Bulletin* 1983). According to Litton, the film market 'should also create new outlets for Asian films in the West and give Western film traders a first-hand feel for the demand throughout Asia' (Hollie 1982). Two hundred film companies participated in the film market, including 86 titles from the Philippines, despite the initial lukewarm reception from

8 See, for example, http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/otc19801128s.pdf.

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local producers towards the festival. Films sold included the Philippines-US co-production women-in-prison exploitation film Hell Hole (Cirio H. Santiago, 1978), bought by American and Indonesian distributors. By the end of the festival, 30 Filipino films worth $500,000 had been sold.

Marking their first attendance at an international film market was a delegation from Indonesia, which brought five films for the exhibition section and seven films to the film trade section at the MIFF. These films were selected by a curatorial team appointed by the Ministry of Information, including both local exploitation movies and so-called 'idealistic films' (*Kompas* 1982). Four Indonesian films were sold to distributors, of which three were 'exploitation' titles: The Queen of Black Magic (Ratu Ilmu Hitam, Lilik Sudjio, 1981), Five Deadly Angels (Lima Cewek Jagoan, Danu Umbara, 1980), and Primitives (Primitif, Sisworo Gautama, 1978). Although the Indonesian government wanted idealistic films to be exported, market demand at MIFF dictated that Indonesian exploitation films would be bought by buyers for distribution in international territories (Leavold 2017).

Originally the MIFF was to be held annually and a second festival was announced and took place in 1983. With a smaller budget and less fanfare, the 1983 festival no longer commanded the glitz and largesse of the first festival and instead became embroiled in local controversy for screening 'pornographic' films (*Kompas* 1983). Whereas screenings had only been held within the Manila Film Center during the first festival, the 1983 MIFF included screenings held at 150 cinemas across Manila for the general public. As with the screenings at the first MIFF, these screenings were censorship-free and featured explicit titles, such as In the Realm of the Senses (Nagisa Oshima, 1976) and local *bomba* film Virgin People (Celso Ad. Castillo, 1982). Responding to the archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Sin, who publicly accused the festival of promoting 'pornography,' Imelda Marcos acknowledged that 'cheap sex films can be bad influence for the society,' but that 'these erotic films will make our people more mature and sophisticated' (*Kompas* 1983). Although a third festival was planned for 1984, budget restraints and a national economic downturn prevented it from being held.

By 1983, the Marcos regime was in decline (Silliman 1984), marked by the brazen assassination of opposition leader Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino on 21 August 1983. This initiated a period of political change, culminating in the People Power Revolution in February 1986 and the restoration of electoral democracy. For a short time, the Philippines tried to become one of the most significant film centres in Asia. Foreign productions would continue to use the Philippines into the 1980s and 1990s, including the Australian production The Year of Living Dangerously (Peter Weir, 1983) which,

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although set in Indonesia, was shot in the Philippines as it was impossible to shoot the politically sensitive story in Indonesia. Platoon (Oliver Stone, 1986) followed Apocalypse Now by shooting its Vietnam War film in Luzon, with production beginning two days after Marcos fled the country following the election of Corazon C. Aquino as president.

Indonesia into the 1980s

The MIFF thus became the venue in which the changing fortunes of exploitation film production in both countries would diverge. While the Philippines continued to be used as a co-production location, many of its local filmmakers turned to the domestic market. Learning from the festival, however, were the Indonesian delegation, who came to understand the possibility of exporting their productions and the viability of export as a business strategy. Over the 1980s, as the Philippines underwent democratic change, Indonesia stepped in as a producer and supplier of exploitation films. Rather than drawing upon a historical association with the United States, the Indonesian effort came at the initiative of local producers who wanted to emulate the success of the Filipinos and others in selling to the global exploitation market. Having sensed the potential of the export market in the 1982 MIFF, Indonesian producers came to develop their own production and promotion techniques targeting these markets.

Prior to this, Indonesian commercial producers had individually struggled to export their films beyond the linguistically similar markets in Malaysia and Singapore and there was little commercial impulse to export overseas. Some ethnic Chinese producers, such as producer Hendrick Gozali, developed their links to Hong Kong and Taiwan and a handful of co-productions were made in Indonesia.[9] Indonesian links to the United States were not as proximate as in the Philippines, in part a result of the anti-American policies and rhetoric of the first President Sukarno. When General Suharto ousted Sukarno in 1966, Indonesia aligned with the West, attracting investment primarily from the United States and Japan. Into the 1970s, most Indonesian film producers were content with targeting the domestic audience which, over the decade, were growing significantly in line with economic development and rising incomes.

9 Examples include The Mad, the Mean, and the Deadly (Joseph Kuo Nan-Hong, 1977), Invincible Monkey Fist (Chen Kuan-Tai, 1978), and Pandji Tengkorak (The Ghostly Face, A. Harris and Yang Shih Ching, 1971).

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By the early 1980s, there was a growing desire to export Indonesian films overseas. Local conditions were becoming more difficult as the New Order regime increased its regulatory control of the film industry while a local crony also began to monopolize film imports into Indonesia (Barker 2019). When two Indonesian films screened at the second Damascus International Film Festival in October 1981, a film distributor was interested in buying the distribution rights of one of the films, but the Indonesian delegation were unsure how to proceed. According to delegation head Rosihan Anwar, Indonesia lacked experience in overseas marketing and sales, and he therefore asked the National Film Board to establish an official institution to promote film overseas (Anwar 1989, pp. 33-34).

Prokjatap Prosar (Kelompok Kerja Tetap Promosi dan Pemasaran Film Indonesia di Luar Negeri, Permanent Working Committee for the Promotion and Marketing of Indonesia Films Abroad) was established in 1981 by the DFN (Dewan Film Nasional, National Film Council) under the supervision of the Department of Information.[10] The 1982 MIFF represented the first overseas mission for Prokjatap Prosar, and among the delegates were producers Gope Samtani (Rapi Films) and Raam Punjabi (Parkit Films). Despite selling some films at the MIFF, Prokjatap Prosar suffered from both a lack of experience in film promotion and not understanding market demand (*Sinar Harapan* 1982a). Gope Samtani noted that: 'there were no synopsis in English, no trailers, no material publication in video cassette. No wonder nobody came to the Indonesian stand' (*Sinar Harapan* 1982b). Another report described the Indonesian producers 'like [they were] hawking merchandise on the sidewalk while inviting people to buy' (*Berita Buana* 1982).

Learning from the experience at the 1982 MIFF, Prokjatap Prosar's marketing skills soon improved. A month later at Berlinale 1982, both Samtani and Punjabi, along with producer L.J.N. Hoffman and actress Debby Cynthia Dewi (who was dressed in traditional Balinese clothing), took turns manning the booth and talking to prospective buyers (Anwar 1989, pp. 35-36). The delegates continued to travel to other film festivals in 1982 and 1983, recording sales at the Berlinale Film Festival (February 1982), Cannes (May 1982), Mercato Internazionale del Film e del Documentario (MIFED, Milan, October 1982), Berlinale (February 1983) and Cannes (May 1983). In 1982 Prokjatap Prosar oversaw 31 transactions in MIFED, 27 in Cannes, 9 in Berlin, and 7 in Manila, and in 1983 another 16 and 31 contracts in Berlinale and Cannes, respectively. In total, the delegates earned US$185,650 (Anwar 1989, pp. 38-39).

10 Rosihan Anwar was the vice chairperson of Prokjatap Prosar. The chairperson was Baginda Siregar, but Anwar was the main intellectual actor and spokesperson for Prokjatap Prosar.

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Although Prokjatap Prosar was founded to promote and export 'quality' films overseas in order to promote Indonesia to the world, Rosihan Anwar (1989) noted that the global market preferred exploitation films:

> Films in high demand at the trade section were dominated by the elements of fantasy, adventure, action, and violence. The films with more dramatic themes were not well received, even those of high quality. (Anwar 1989, p. 34)

In fact, such 'quality' films or films with 'cultural and educational purposes' actually failed to sell (Imanjaya 2016), which Anwar rationalized by suggesting that:

> Of first importance was to make Indonesia's name known as a film producer, much in the way that Hong Kong found a place for itself on the international film map through the promotion of its kung fu films. Later, after Indonesia had acquired a name, it would be in much better position to market higher quality films. (Anwar 1989, pp. 37, 39)

While such ambitions were not in line with the aims of Prokjatap Prosar, these commercial, exploitation titles nevertheless became the primary vector of Indonesian cinema's entry into global cinematic circulation.

With the appointment of Harmoko as the new Indonesia Minister of Information and a corresponding change in film policies, Prokjatap Prosar was disbanded in 1983 (Anwar 1989, p. 41). Nevertheless, local producers, notably Punjabi and Samtani, continued to attend international film markets, including Milan, Cannes, Berlinale and Los Angeles, at their own initiative and expense (Endah 2005, p. 174; Anwar 1989, p. 40). Samtani, in particular, felt that the best strategy for Indonesian producers was to adjust their films to international film markets, which favoured the exploitation-associated genres of horror, action and adventure films (*Sinar Harapan* 1982b). These films were released domestically as well as exported overseas.

In line with their export ambitions and what they perceived as appropriate content, both Punjabi and Samtani sought collaborations with foreign partners on co-production projects. In 1984, Rapi Film collaborated with Rapid Film GMBH (Munich, Germany) to make No Time to Die (Danger – Keine Zeit zum Sterben/Menentang Maut), co-directed by Helmut Ashley, E.G. Bakker and Hasmanan with local actors Barry Prima, W.D. Mochtar and Zainal Abidin alongside Americans Chris Mitchum and John Philip Law, and German Winfred Glateader. In 1987, Punjabi partnered

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Illustration 11.1 Cynthia Rothrock fronts the poster for Membela Harga Diri/Rage and Honor II (Guy Norris and Ackyl Anwari, 1992)

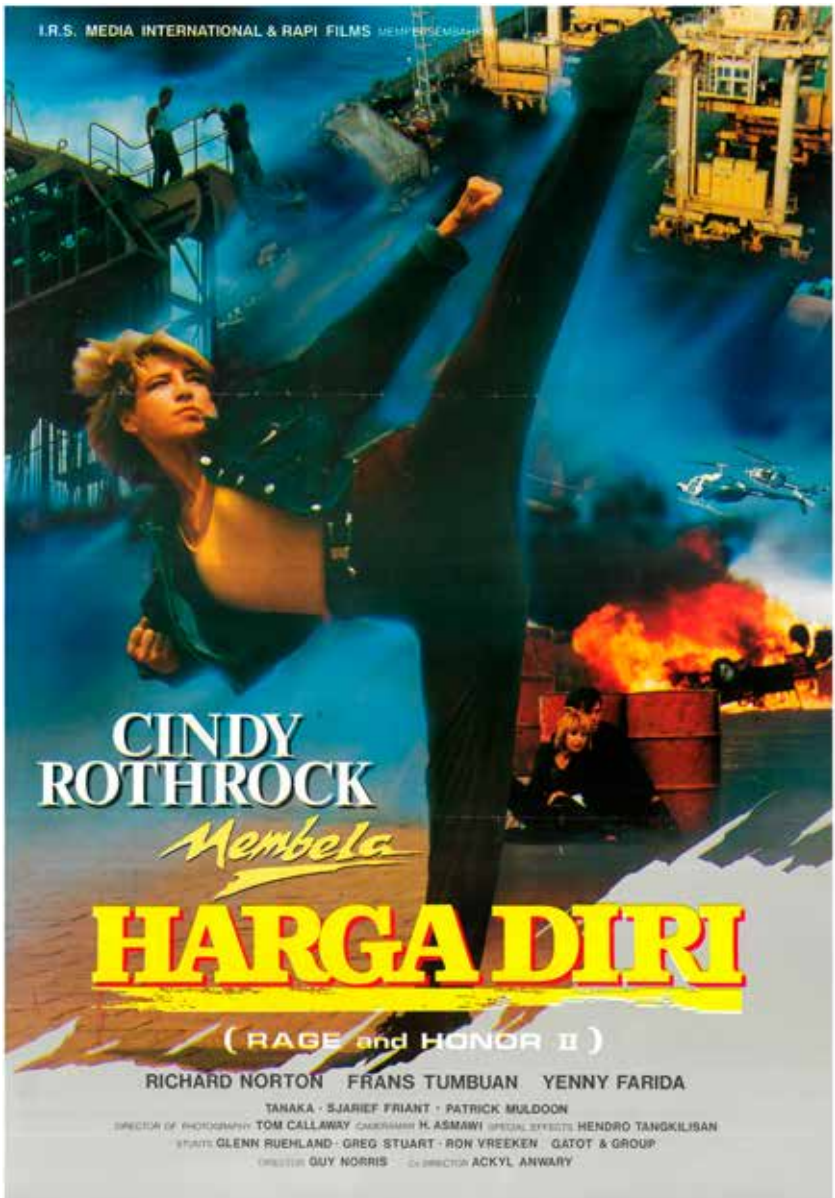

Image courtesy of Rapi Films

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with Troma Entertainment to co-produce Peluru dan Wanita (Jakarta (Triangle Invasion), Charles Kauffman, 1988), starring Christopher Noth and Sue Frances Pai (aka Suzee Pai) (Endah 2005; Barker 2014, p. 18), a film that was distributed straight to video by Troma Entertainment within the United States.

Echoing practices from the Philippines in the 1960s and 1970s, Indonesian producers brought in foreign actors or hired locally to give the films an international appearance.[11] Non-professional actors also appeared, such as tourists (Barbara Anne Constable, Ilona Agathe Bastian) and an English teacher (Peter O'Brian) (Barker 2014, pp. 15-16; Endah 2005, p. 175). Towards the end of the 1980s a number of foreign directors – including Guy Norris and Robert Chappell – were hired to helm Indonesian-produced films. Alongside English-language dubbing and English titles, this saw Indonesian productions increasingly integrating with American film industry contacts and storylines. As evident in productions such as Virgins from Hell (Ackyl Anwari, 1987), and Jungle Heat (Ratno Timoer, 1988), both producers imitated the generic features of women-in-prison and cannibalism (also known as jungle or expedition) films, respectively (Imanjaya 2016), while The Stabilizer (Pembalasan Rambu, Jopi Burnama, 1986) is a 'mockbuster' imitating the then popular Rambo series of American action films.

While this situation resulted in content that conformed to the perceived tastes and norms of the international exploitation market, it also produced opportunity for innovation, copying and adaptation. Angel of Fury (Ackyl Anwari, 1992) mixes various influences, including a story about an American security specialist (played by Cynthia Rothrock) transporting a secret computer with fight scenes choreographed and filmed like a Hong Kong martial arts film. Lady Terminator (1989) for example is a clear rip-off of the 1984 film The Terminator (James Cameron), but in the Indonesian 'version' the robot from the future is replaced by an incarnation of the South Sea Queen, a figure from Indonesian folklore such that the film is also simultaneously a parody of American cinema (Smith 2016).

This heavy emphasis upon exploitation-oriented films for export began to challenge the domestic controls over film production in Indonesia and threatened the 'image' of Indonesia overseas. In order to include content normally censored in Indonesia, many films were exported without permission, earning the ire of local authorities (Barata 1989) and leading film journalist Martha to comment that the 'Government cannot totally supervise the film production if all of the film productions are not fully made and

11 For example, actors Mike Abbott, Billy Drago, Mike 'Superfoot' Wallace and Cynthia Rothrock.

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held in Indonesia' (Martha 1989). For instance, despite screening in Japan, the United States and India, some joint-production films were not given a *surat tanda lulus sensor* (certificate of censorship) or a *surat izin ekspor* (export license). This was particularly true of Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan (The Revenge of the South Sea Queen, 1989), which was banned domestically because of nudity but released uncensored internationally as Lady Terminator.

Indonesian productions for export reached their peak in the early 1990s with titles including Dangerous Seductress (Bercinta dengan Maut, Tjut Djalil, 1992), Lady Dragon 2 (Bidadari Berambut Emas, Ackyl Anwari, 1992), and Without Mercy (Pemburu Teroris, Robert Anthony and Norman Benny, 1996). Although export-orientated productions had reached budgets of US$1 million, the domestic film industry was in decline, and many filmmakers, including Samtani and Punjabi, moved to supply content to the new private TV stations. Locally the film industry turned towards *filem esek-esek* (sex films) without export ambitions (Imanjaya 2016), in a turn seen in the Philippines in the 1970s with *bomba* and later *pito-pito* films (Espiritu 2018, pp. 86-88). As in the Philippines, the authoritarian political conditions that had seemingly fostered exploitation production would come to an end with the resignation of President Suharto in May 1998.

By the late 1990s, the networks of producers and distributors that had previously sustained the exploitation production dissipated and disappeared as technologies and audiences changed. Home video (VHS) which had sustained production throughout the 1980s and 1990s as cinemas closed, declined as a technology as digital formats and distribution became more common. Audience tastes were also changing with the rise of new independent film movements, and greater access to world cinema, relegating many of the exploitation films of the 1970s and 1980s to the domain of avid fans and collectors, and shifting the exploitation era into a field for cult cinema research (Martin 2015). Both countries would continue to find outlets in international film festivals, but the export potential for exploitation films had passed.

Conclusion: Exploitation Southeast Asia

Although the MIFF is now largely forgotten or viewed as one of the excesses of the Marcos regime, closer analysis of activities around this festival reveals how the Philippines and Indonesia were linked into the global film market through the vector of exploitation. Exploitation content and co-production relationships shaped how these two nations participated in global cinema.

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The other prominent means was through art cinema and appreciation at international film festivals (see Campos, this volume, Chapter 9). Nevertheless, these exploitation films represented an important component of the development of film production and globalization in both countries.

Although American producers and distributors used the relationships to the Philippines and Indonesia within the exploitation mode of production, partners in the Philippines and Indonesian filmmakers likewise used these opportunities and relationships to innovate, develop, and expand their own cinematic practices and sources of income. It gave rise to important figures in both countries and fostered cinematic practices that continue to reverberate in contemporary cinema in both countries. Although officially at odds with national film policies and ideals, exploitation films nevertheless flourished under the authoritarian political conditions at the time.

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12 Mapping Regional Ambivalence and Anxieties in They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong

Sophia Siddique

Abstract

They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong (Bobby A. Suarez, 1978) has been contextualized within film scholarship as a transnational text, a cult product, a canonical text of exploitation cinema and a key work within the Asian spy genre. This chapter argues that the film contributes to the ways in which popular culture negotiated political and economic tensions surrounding the development and presence of ASEAN since it was founded in 1967. One such tension revolved around striking a delicate balance between regional cooperation and the recognition of national sovereignty. Using Kristin Thompson's framework of cinematic excess, I argue that the film imagines and images this tension by positioning Wong as the force which reifies the primacy of ASEAN, while the film's representation of landscapes foregrounds and privileges national specificity.

Keywords: ASEAN, Cleopatra Wong, cinematic excess, Singapore, Philippines, cultural text

Released in 1978, They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong (directed by Bobby A. Suarez) showcases the daring exploits of Interpol agent extraordinaire Cleopatra Wong (Marrie Lee aka Doris Young) as she is tasked by Interpol chiefs from Singapore and the Philippines to break up a counterfeit currency ring. With resolve and conviction, Cleopatra Wong harnesses a defence network of Interpol agents and together they soon discover a shadow organization, seeking to flood ASEAN member countries with counterfeit currency in order to capitalize on the anticipated collapse of the new ASEAN

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economy. Made with a budget of approximately US$70,000, the film earned global cult status, even counting American filmmaker Quentin Tarantino as a fan (Uhde and Uhde 2010, p. 53).

Despite such popular and global appeal, the film has barely received sustained scholarly interest. Those who have engaged with the work position it as a transnational text (Baumgärtel 2006), a cult object (Baumgärtel 2006; Paul 2007; Yew 2011), a seminal work of exploitation cinema (Paul 2007; Baumgärtel 2006) and a representative of the Asian spy genre (Yew 2011). Yet few of these works, save Yew's essay, have given much critical or sustained attention to the prominent presence of ASEAN within the film's diegesis and dialogue. Yew situates ASEAN within a broader analysis of director Bobby A. Suarez's oeuvre in connection with 'Cold War cultural studies' (Yew 2011, p. 289). Using a framework of 'diegetic misalignment,' he argues that such misalignment occurs when the 'main diegesis of the film does not cohere seamlessly with what is happening in the real world' (ibid., 2011, p. 295). Rather than a 'misalignment,' I position Cleopatra Wong as a cultural text. A cultural text does not function as a mere inert, reflective surface; instead, it operates as an 'active generator[s] of cultural meanings' (Dissanayake 1992, p. 4). While Thomas Barker and Ekky Imanjaya (this volume, Chapter 11) situate such transnational exploitation cinemas in Indonesia and the Philippines within their respective political contexts, in this case New Order Indonesia (1966-1998) and the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986), Cleopatra Wong operates as a cultural text within a set of *regional* concerns, most notably speaking to political and economic developments within a developing ASEAN in the 1970s.

Cleopatra Wong therefore shapes the ways in which popular culture negotiated political and economic anxieties and tensions surrounding the development and presence of ASEAN within Southeast Asia and beyond. In addition, any engagement with Cleopatra Wong as a cultural text contributes to a broader understanding of regional film production in the 1970s, a historical period that has itself been occluded by film historiographies that privilege the regional new waves of the 1990s and the turn towards independent digital filmmaking. The closure of vertically integrated studios Shaw Brothers (1967) and Cathay-Keris (1972) within Southeast Asia opened avenues for the consolidation of smaller production companies, like the regional collaborative efforts of B.A.S. Films International. Alongside a mode of regional film production came the impetus to forge ASEAN, a regional political and economic alliance, in 1967. At the time of the film's release in 1978, ASEAN member-states consisted of Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. A central tension amidst the

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growing prominence of ASEAN pivoted upon the promotion of regional economic cooperation and the recognition of political sovereignty for each member-state. The film as a cultural text actively explores this tension by mapping it across the body of its central protagonist, Cleopatra Wong, and through the depiction of landscapes within member-states Singapore and the Philippines, as well as the built environment of Hong Kong. It is Cleopatra Wong's mobility, corporeality and carnality that serves as the propulsive force and connective tissue for ASEAN's regional imaginary and topography, for she is the only character who is able to travel freely throughout the region. At the same time, the film engages with national specificity through its representation of landscapes in almost ethnographic detail. Cleopatra Wong's copious costume changes, kinaesthetic prowess, and florid weaponry and the rich textures of Singapore, the Philippines and Hong Kong may seem almost superfluous to the narrative. Yet, such images and textures are central to the film's work of imaging and imagining the inherent tension between the regional (ASEAN) and the national (member-state).

I deploy film scholar Kristin Thompson's framework of cinematic excess as a critical methodology precisely because she provides a pathway to move beyond the dictates of narrative logic to embrace such textural and visual expressions. Thompson's approach is compelling as it offers a mode of spectatorship that does not privilege a film's narrative structure and design. Rather, this approach calls for engaging with film as a 'perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length' (1977, p. 63). Such an orientation invites a 'perceptual freshness' (Thompson 1977, p. 62) towards the work. In the case of Cleopatra Wong, a focus on excess opens the film's representation of hyperbolic femininity (Wong) and elements of the film's mise en scène (costume and setting) to a reading that extends beyond genre (Asian spy), fandom (cult object) and authorship (Bobby A. Suarez). What cinematic excess reveals is an ambivalent cultural text, one that ultimately uses Wong to serve the normalizing function of reifying the primacy of ASEAN even as the film's representation of landscapes foregrounds and privileges national specificity.

Regional Excess: Cleopatra Wong and ASEAN

Director Bobby A. Suarez himself explicitly stated that he wished to develop 'closer ties through motion pictures among the member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)' (Uhde and Uhde 2010, p. 51). This regional outlook was timely given the profound changes in the

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region's film industries, most notably that of Singapore. The exodus of Malay-language talent to Malaysia (after Singapore's expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965) was a key factor in the closure of two studios that had dominated the box office during Singapore's golden era of the 1950s; Shaw Brothers closed in 1967 and Cathay-Keris shut its studio in 1972. Singaporean filmmakers like Tony Yeo and James Sebastian [Ring of Fury, 1973] and independent producers like Bobby A. Suarez became part of a small contingent of producers who entered the vacuum left by the now shuttered and collapsed studio system in Singapore. Bobby A. Suarez's keen eye for regional and international box office markets led to a creative partnership with Sunny Lim (Singapore) and Mohamed Ashraf (Malaysia). Formed in 1977, B.A.S. Films International was to produce English-language films such as They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong (1978). B.A.S. Films International also released Dynamite Johnson (Bobby A. Suarez, 1979) while the third in the Wong series, The Devil's Three (Bobby A. Suarez, 1979/1981) was produced solely in the Philippines (Uhde and Uhde 2010, pp. 51-52). The series was marketed and distributed in the 'United States, Germany, Spain, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Mexico' (Uhde and Uhde 2010, p. 53). In addition to the exploitation films produced under the B.A.S banner, Indonesia and the Philippines produced a spate of films for similar markets (for example, Mystics in Bali, directed by H. Tjut Djalil in 1981, and Women in Cages, directed by Gerardo de León in 1971) (see Barker and Imanjaya, this volume, Chapter 11).

The desire and necessity for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia arose from a number of global tensions (for example, the Cold War and the American War in Vietnam) and intra-regional ones: Indonesia's campaign to 'crush Malaysia'; Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia due to irreconcilable Malay-Chinese tensions; and Philippines's and Malaysia's competing claims to Sabah (Ba 2009, pp. 1-2). To mitigate or manage these and subsequent tensions, political scientist Alice D. Ba argues that ASEAN adopted a strategy of 'cumulative dialogue or [a] series of social negotiations on the material and normative foundations of regional order' (2009, p. 8). Such a 'new culture of regional dialogue' (Ba 2009, p. 5) emphasized communication that acknowledged the need to balance regional cooperation with the recognition of state sovereignty. Indeed, foreign ministers were aware of the inherent fragility of a purely nationalist approach. S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's foreign minister and one of the original signatories of the 1967 declaration spoke about this balance when he urged that '[w]e must think not only of our national interests but posit them against regional interests: that is a new way of thinking about our problems.' Though acknowledging

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that 'these are two different things and sometimes they can conflict,' he advocated for making 'painful and difficult adjustments,' to ensure that ASEAN did not remain 'a utopia' (ASEAN n.d.).

Meanwhile, Narciso Ramos, the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, who was also a signatory to the declaration, outlined the critical need for regional economic cooperation. He recognized that the 'fragmented economies of Southeast Asia [...] with each country pursuing its own limited objectives' could 'carry the seeds of weakness in their incapacity for growth and their self-perpetuating dependence on the advanced, industrial nations.' ASEAN could become an economic regional alliance that would allow these member-states to 'marshal the still untapped potentials of this rich region through more substantial united action' (ASEAN n.d.). Cleopatra Wong as a cultural text contributes to such cumulative dialogues, highlighting the extent to which ASEAN is recognized in popular and cultural discourses during this historical moment. For example, in a meeting with Cleopatra Wong in Manila, the Filipino station chief emphatically states:

> It's too real to be fake. It's been accepted by every bank in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Jakarta, and here in Manila. And this kind of money is now in general circulation in five Asian countries. Only an expert using sophisticated technical equipment and chemicals can tell us that these are bogus currencies. If this continues, the result will be a great economic disaster in the region as people will lose faith in their own currencies. Whoever is behind this must be trying to prevent the ASEAN from becoming a powerful economic bloc in Asia. Interpol agents from five member nations are now trying to find the source of these fake currencies. (Suarez 1978)

Embedded in this dialogue are sentiments that speak to the concerns raised by S. Rajaratnam and Ramos as well as ASEAN's positions on economic stability, political sovereignty and the possibility of security risks. For example, the memo generated at the First ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, on November 1975, called for member nations to 'cooperate to strengthen the economic resilience of the individual countries and of ASEAN' (ASEAN 1975). A little later, on 24 February 1976, ASEAN member-states signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in Indonesia (ASEAN 1976). The language contained in this treaty specifically indicates the increasing emphasis on consolidating disparate nation-states in Southeast Asia into a regional economic bloc.

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This consolidation of a regional imaginary continues to find its way into the film's dialogue. For example, the film features OCBC and UOB, both banking bastions in Singapore. Cleopatra Wong locates the office of Singapore Interpol chief in the UOB Building. The set décor includes a prominent portrait of then-president of Singapore, Benjamin Sheares (1971-1981), coupled with a peculiar exchange between Cleopatra Wong and the Singapore Interpol chief. This dialogue affirms S. Rajaratnam's call to capitalize on ASEAN as 'a new way of thinking about our problems' (ASEAN n.d.), thereby recalibrating the tensions between national demands and international interests:

> *Singapore Interpol chief*: We've been grilling Argo and his men for practically the whole night. And all we can get from them is the information that the fake money is coming in from Hong Kong.
> *Cleopatra Wong*: What we don't know is how it's been brought in and who the mastermind is.
> *Singapore Interpol chief*: The important thing is that we have Argo and his men. The spread of fake money at least here in Singapore will be stopped.
> *Cleopatra Wong*: Yes, but what about the other ASEAN countries?
> *Singapore Interpol chief*: A very good question, Cleo. I think you'll find some answers in Hong Kong, if you're up to it.
> *Cleopatra Wong*: Hong Kong? Well … why not?

In this scene alone, Cleopatra Wong as a cultural text showcases Singapore's strength as a city-nation and hence its constructed 'national resilience' (ASEAN 1976, Article 9) to external influences. The scene demonstrates Singapore's bureaucratic efficiency and commitment to justice by halting the 'spread of fake money' and, notably, it is Cleopatra Wong herself who utters the most significant line in this collegial exchange.

While the film's dialogue speaks in explicit terms about the central tensions, dilemmas and concerns surrounding the stability and primacy of ASEAN, the film's representations of Cleopatra Wong offer a more nuanced engagement. The film's focus on Cleopatra Wong's display of hyperbolic femininity as well as copious shots of landscapes seems at first glance to escape the confines of narrative causality and logic. But, Kristin Thompson's framework of cinematic excess allows for a reading that draws attention to and renders palpable and material the regional tensions faced by ASEAN and its member-states.

Cinematic excess theorizes the relationship between the spectator and film text that is not based upon a logic rooted within narrative clarity,

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economy or structure. It manifests or reveals itself when 'motivation fails' (Thompson 1977, p. 58). Instances within which cinematic excess becomes discernible to the spectator occur precisely at the intersection between function and motivation. For example, cinematic excess may emerge from the fissure between function and motivation when a device may be used for one motivation and through its ceaseless repetition and variation exceeds its original motivation (Thompson 1977, p. 59). The expansive possibilities of cinematic excess are compelling; while spectacle draws its root etymology from 'spectaculum/public show' (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.) and centres vision, cinematic excess opens this 'perceptual field of structures' (Thompson 1977, p. 63) to include vision and the other senses. For example, Thompson accords the possibilities of excess to both image *and* sound. When the presence of a device is visible in the frame or audible in the film's sound design and lingers after the audience already grasps the device's narrative function, cinematic excess becomes possible (Thompson 1977, p. 58). Devices can encompass props, shot compositions, performances, costumes, which would include 'textures, colours, and shapes' (ibid., 1977, p. 60). Such devices – costume, props, and performances – are precisely the ones I turn to in my excavation of the film as a cultural text.

Scholars Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco further situate excess as embodied and place the female body or corporeality front and centre (2005, p. 10). Excessiveness, especially when tied to hyperbolic demonstrations of femininity, can be considered a 'resistant practice' (ibid., p. 9) as such expressions of femininity challenge patriarchal norms that dictate decorum. In this sense, bodies themselves transform into 'sites of cultural negotiation [...] and must be understood through social, historical, political, and cultural lenses' (ibid., p. 11). Cleopatra Wong depicts its central protagonist literally and figuratively as the embodiment of ASEAN; it is through her body that the integrity of ASEAN is upheld, and the stability of ASEAN restored. Yet, her body occupies a site of ambivalence; she is both subversive in her excessive femininity yet is made to serve a normalizing function of upholding the primacy of ASEAN.

As the text of the film poster proclaims, Cleopatra Wong 'purrs like a kitten, makes love like a siren, fights like a panther. This side of the Pacific she is the deadliest, meanest and sexiest secret agent' (see Figure 12.1). Accompanying these proclamations are images that give the spectator not one but *three* Cleopatra Wongs. Each figure is wearing a different suggestive costume while holding phallic weapons of various types: arrows with explosives tips, a handgun and what appears to be a four-barrelled shotgun. Such similes drawn from Greek mythology and felines as well as the profusion of

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Illustration 12.1 Publicity material for They Call Her… Cleopatra Wong (Bobby A. Suarez, 1978)

Image courtesy of Doris Young

weapons and sensual sartorial garb can elicit cries of 'too much.' But there is more to Cleopatra Wong than such hyperbolic proclamations would suggest. Her fluid and effortless kung fu skills are made manifest through clothing and fabrics that cling to her body; in essence Cleopatra Wong is 'constructed

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through' her 'costume' (Bruzzi 1997, p. xv). In an apparent homage to her namesake, Cleopatra Jones, in Cleopatra Wong, Cleopatra Wong's 'whole look alters with every sequence' (Bruzzi 1997, p. 99).

In addition, Cleopatra Wong's breathing draws visceral attention and attunement to her corporeality and hyperbolic femininity. She is breathless in two senses of the word: breathless in a sexually suggestive manner during two of the film's scenes of sexual encounter and breath-less during physical displays of exertion in the film's numerous action sequences. While such scenes and Wong's embodied hyperbolic femininity could be situated within a Mulvian form of erotic spectacle and 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1989, pp. 19-20), Wong's 'too much' asks for a more nuanced reading of spectacle and excess. For spectacle can be located in 'action babe cinema' that centres the female protagonist as both the active narrative agent and, within the dictates of patriarchal culture, an erotic object (O'Day 2004, p. 203). Action babe cinema, and the action babe protagonist such as Cleopatra Wong, are 'both the erotic object of visual spectacle and the action subject of narrative spectacle' (O'Day 2004, p. 205). Wong is the propulsive force around which all other characters coalesce. Cinematic excess further moves the encounter to a different bodily register. Cinematic excess resides in these myriad costume changes (texture and mise en scène), in the multiplication of weapons (touch and mise en scène), and in her perceptible 'audible respiration' (Ferguson 2011, p. 2) (sound and hearing). The character's question about the other ASEAN countries signals the degree to which Wong serves as the embodied and material expression of the economic strength of ASEAN and such alliance building hinges on the ability to generate, produce and sustain cumulative dialogues.

National Excess: Landscapes

While the narrative (in the form of dialogue) and the body of Cleopatra Wong foregrounds ASEAN, the film's cinematography invites the spectator into an immersive engagement with each country's complex built environment topography, and postcolonial and colonial histories (Singapore, the Philippines and Hong Kong), thereby reifying both the complexity of national sovereignty and exposing the fragility and tension of ASEAN as a regional association.

Certain cinematographic choices in Cleopatra Wong become open to cinematic excess when they linger beyond the dictates of narrative economy (such as the establishing shot). One such choice is the deployment of a specific type of camera movement and camera distance. In scenes involving

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the intermingling of action and landscape, a camera tilt or pan surveys the unfolding story events from an expansive camera distance (aerial, wide shot, extreme long shot). Rather than cut on action, the camera will linger on the landscape for a few seconds even after characters exit the frame. Film scholar Gerald Sim argues that cinema has the 'ability to act as maps of topography and thus of ideology' (2011, p. 361). Sim maps out how representations of urban space can 'exceed the utility of establishing shots in classical film practice [...] in order to perform a more significant function' (2011, p. 361). Such an understanding of landscape and cinematic excess generates the opportunity to excavate the specificity of place and history within the built environments of ASEAN member-states (Singapore and the Philippines) and ASEAN's East Asian economic competitor (Hong Kong). It is through these detailed cinematic representations that the national (with its postcolonial imprints) are foregrounded. The invitation to linger and to gaze at Singapore through repeated long shots and takes is designed to highlight Singapore as a modern city-nation that is ensconced within the rule of law (political stability), has formidable financial prowess and is particularly desirable (lucrative retail, tourist and hospitality industries).

The film opens with a long shot and take that emphasizes Singapore as an urban and efficient city-nation. For instance, the film highlights Singapore's tourist economy alongside metonymic extensions of the nation (such as the national carrier Singapore Airlines with its brand clearly visible in a long take as well as its modern, bustling airport). Through this patterning of lingering camera movements and distance, the overall perceptual freshness of Singapore communicates a nation with a vibrant economy, efficient infrastructure and a city-state that is both modern and verdant.

Singapore's burgeoning infrastructure is featured through a sequence in which Cleopatra Wong and her Singapore Interpol chief engage in conversation as their car travels along the Toa Payoh Pan-Island Expressway (PIE). The exchange of dialogue performs an expository function but the drive itself and the signature combination of camera distance and movement again invites the spectator to marvel at Singapore's efficiency and high-quality infrastructure, highlighting Singapore's built environment, its lush landscape and its successful urban planning. Yet, cinematic excess also calls into awareness the extent to which Singapore's built environment and urban planning are 'indeed inextricable from its status as a British colony' (Sim 2011, p. 364) and, as a cultural text, the film enfolds Singapore's colonial history into Singapore's national imaginary.

Through such shots and mise en scène, the film signals an earlier period of Singapore's history, when the nation had become one of the Straits

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Settlements (Savage and Yeoh 2004, p. 79). For instance, the Cavenagh Bridge, opened in 1869 to celebrate the founding of the Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements in 1867, features prominently in the film. Yet, as the oldest surviving bridge across the Singapore River, the Cavenagh Bridge also marks the exploitation of labour from Indian convicts (Savage and Yeoh 2004, p. 79). Other colonial traces are evident: Cleopatra Wong strolls alongside the Padang (Field) and past City Hall; both harken to Sir Stamford Raffles's bid to cultivate an area for 'public purposes' when this space had been known as Padang Besar (Big Field) (Savage and Yeoh 2004, p. 289).

That cinematic excess draws attention and attunement to Singapore's very unique landscape is particularly evident in scenes depicting Mount Faber, Sentosa and the cable car. Here, the neophyte nation's tourist economy is highlighted with copious shots of cable cars from a variety of vantage points. Cleopatra Wong is chased by members of the criminal network as she and her female agent enter one cable car and the pursuers occupy several others. The cinematography, editing and mise en scène highlight both the sheer number of cable cars and the spectacular aerial views of Singapore's built environment. Such shots function as an archival record of Singapore's urban planning and emerging tourist economy but also capture a landscape in the midst of urban development. In addition, the film locates the central lair of the criminal gang across the Chinese Arch Bridge and within the Chinese Garden (Jurong), suggesting that Mount Faber, Sentosa and the Arch Bridge are spatially contiguous. In this way, the film as cultural text continues to build an image of Singapore as a key tourist destination. Indeed, this Chinese themed garden was a tourist attraction that first opened in 1975, just three years prior to the film's release, while other tourist locations include Mohd Sultan Road (officially named in 1898) (Savage and Yeoh 2004, p. 266).

In addition to the camera distance and movement highlighted above, the film also uses a slow zoom lens to draw attention to Singapore's built environment and its tourism sites, hospitality industry and key financial centres. One such example features the Sea View Hotel. Here, the camera movement tilts to capture the building's impressive architecture, after which a zoom guides the spectator's eye to one room in particular. The film then cuts to a luxurious hotel room where Cleopatra Wong confronts several henchmen with a dazzling display of kung fu skills. If shots of Singapore emphasize its urban landscape, the plot's move to the Philippines dwells on more rural and pastoral landscapes.

After discovering that crates marked 'made in the Philippines' contain glass bottles of strawberry jam full of counterfeit currency, Cleopatra Wong embarks on a journey to the Philippines in order to stop the nefarious

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activities of the shadow organization. The Philippines is significant as a site for such activities. At the time of Cleopatra Wong's release (1978) and more generally, during the 1970s, the Philippines was under an authoritarian regime led by President Ferdinand E. Marcos (in power from 1965-1986) and under martial law (1972-1981). The entire conceit of counterfeit operations in a monastery that produces strawberry jam is not entirely farfetched. The Good Shepherd is actually a convent located in Benguet (Baguio, Luzon) that does indeed produce strawberry jam and the strawberry fields featured in the film are important sources of revenue for the regional and national Filipino economy. The film depicts Manila, the capital city of the Philippines, as a series of interior locations. There are no establishing shots of the capital city and the only references to Manila are in the film's dialogue. Indeed, the film refuses to give any entrance to the iconography of the city; the spectator never sees metro Manila's built environment, its traffic or any semblance of urban life. Likewise, the Manila Interpol chief's office is nondescript in comparison to the office of Singapore's Interpol chief: while a framed photograph of Singapore's then-president, Benjamin Shares, is prominently displayed, no such visibly centred portrait of President Marcos is discernible in the Filipino chief's office. Cleopatra Wong's geographical reorientation away from a capital city and towards the strawberry farms of the Cordillera mountains situates metro Manila as a capital city which is ineffectual in terms of the rule of law. Indeed, it is in Manila that the Interpol chief informs Cleopatra Wong of the counterfeiting ring and asks for her help.

Instead, the film revels in the depiction of cultivated strawberry fields and the putative 'monastery' (more likely a convent as the only inhabitants we see are dressed in nuns' habits). Through a focus upon the monastery's architecture, colonial imprints are made material and visible; indeed, Cleopatra Wong allocates much screen time to a detailed tour of the monastery with its brick corridors and grounds, a reference to the Philippines's 'almost 400 years of Spanish colonization' (Baumgärtel 2006). In addition to such architectural detail, the film depicts the shadow organization's counterfeit currency network in painstaking, almost ethnographic, detail, depicting voluminous sheets of currency being printed while also explaining that the print workers were kidnapped from metro Manila to serve the demands of the shadow organization. This close depiction of the monastery as well as the detailed explication of the counterfeiting process far exceed any narrative function and instead indicates a nuanced engagement with the Philippines as a postcolonial nation-state.

While Singapore and the Philippines are member-states of ASEAN, the film's other significant location is Hong Kong, which is identified as the locus of illicit activity in the film and serves as the port through which the

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counterfeiting network from the Philippines circulates its bogus ASEAN currencies. Such a depiction serves as a foil to ASEAN and at the same time hints at the ambivalent relationship between Hong Kong/East Asia and ASEAN/Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is in Hong Kong that Cleopatra Wong both observes the intricate money laundering in situ and also takes part in extensive fight sequences.

Historically, as both a territory under British colonial rule and one of the world's busiest ports, Hong Kong was an economic competitor with Singapore and played an ambivalent role vis-à-vis ASEAN in the 1970s. Located in East Asia, Hong Kong was not a member of ASEAN and at the time of Cleopatra Wong was still under British rule with the eventual handover to China close to two decades away (1997). By serving as the mechanism through which the counterfeit currency entered and exited ASEAN nations, Hong Kong functions to test the strengths and sanctity of not only the juridical and financial systems within each member country but also the resilience of the economic bloc as a whole, a resilience that is seemingly enacted and affirmed.

This ambivalent relationship extends to a filmic one as well. Bobby A. Suarez and his partners had considered producing genre films popular in both the United States and Hong Kong (Millet 2006, pp. 73-74). In the case of Hong Kong, the kung fu genre was certainly a source of both inspiration and mimicry. For example, Cleopatra Wong commands respect and vanquishes her pursuers in Hong Kong through feats of physical dexterity and prowess. Her talents and genealogy – Doris Young was renamed 'Marrie Lee' to draw associations to Bruce Lee – lend legitimacy to Cleopatra Wong as a bona fide contender for box office markets in Hong Kong and other international markets (Millet 2006; Uhde and Uhde 2010).

All three locations depicted in the film (Singapore, the Philippines and Hong Kong) have colonial histories that contribute to ways in which Cleopatra Wong actively images and imagines the fraught national and postcolonial imprints of ASEAN member-states. Such locations are foregrounded through a film style that favours Thompson's cinematic excess and so offers increased recognition of the ways in which landscape, topography and ideology function as means to foreground the complexity of national specificity as well as ASEAN's role as an economic bloc in greater Asia.

Conclusion

Though Millet observes that Cleopatra Wong and Dynamite Johnson (Bobby A. Suarez, 1979) are films 'that were not meant to be taken seriously,'

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he recognizes that they are 'memorably loaded with energy, campiness, and quirkiness' (2006, p. 76). Yet, while I appreciate the film's campy excess, I hope it is clear that the film is also a serious cultural text in which excess performs important functions. I use cinematic excess as a means to explore the regional-national tensions within ASEAN in the 1970s. Such a reading enriches critical understanding of Cleopatra Wong. Uhde and Uhde acknowledge that Cleopatra Wong (and the other exploitation films in Singapore in the 1970s), 'can be seen as courageous attempts to rekindle local production through regional co-operation, as important historical documents, and as a source of early Singapore nostalgia' (2010, p. 53). In the behind-the-scenes DVD supplement, Bobby A. Suarez acknowledges his fraught position within the Filipino film industry as he considered himself to be a 'poor producer' who 'couldn't afford to hire bankable stars' and therefore had to set his sights on the lucrative international exploitation market. Likewise, film historiographies on regional exploitation cinemas face compelling and vexed concerns around authorship and national cinemas or finding new frames within which to read cult or exploitation cinemas such as those offered by Barker and Imanjaya.

Marrie Lee [aka Doris Young] currently owns the intellectual property of Cleopatra Wong and, according to her website, hopes to make a sequel to the film ('They Call Me Cleopatra Wong' n.d.). In the reboot, Young shared that ASEAN could 'still form the impetus for Wong's mission but the crime will be more modern, more current' (Young 2018). While the shape of the threat faced by ASEAN will necessarily shift, ASEAN still occupies a place in contemporary popular and cultural discourse. As a cultural text, this reboot of Cleopatra Wong will join its predecessor in producing a new set of cumulative dialogues surrounding the efficacy and viability of ASEAN in the twenty-first century.

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13 The Boonchu Comedy Series

Pre-1990s Thai Localism and Modernity

Sasinee Khuankaew

Abstract
Research on Thai films after the 1997 economic crash identifies a strong nostalgia for unblemished Thai traditions, ones particularly represented through the countryside and the ideal rural family unit. However, this chapter aims to investigate the comedic Boonchu film series, dating from 1988 to 1996, to address how these films also valorize rural Thailand, a scenario constructed as real 'Thainess.' The chapter examines localism, a discourse promoted by the series as a means to undermine modernization, so revealing considerable anxiety around cultural and economic transformation. Nonetheless, the chapter argues that while the series idealizes rural identity as a means to defend Thai cultural values, it also offers a negotiation (rather than a rejection) of various influences of modernity.

Keywords: Thai films, Thainess, localism, Thai cultural values

Thai films are regarded as major indicators of the modernization of twentieth-century Thailand. Prior to 1997, Thai films were mainly produced for a domestic market only, employing a presentational film style that focused upon producing visceral pleasures for local audiences (Ainslie 2017). Often known as the golden age of Thai cinema, this era lasted throughout the 1960s and produced a significant volume of films, deploying a mixture of genre traits such as romance, melodrama, action and comedy. Such films were deeply intertwined with both sociopolitical and cultural contexts; for instance, the 1970 superhero film Insee thong (The Golden Eagle, Mitr Chaibancha) depicts a hero similar to that of James Bond or Batman, but who specifically fights against socialism/communism, an ideology regarded as a

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threat to the country at that particular time. During the political changes of the 1970s, the students' uprising in October 1973 then led to an interest from filmmakers in social conflict and injustice issues. Films such as PHLAE KAO (The Scar, Cherd Songsri, 1977) were released after the 1970s civil conflicts between Thai students and the military, exploring the hardships and the social significance of the poor. In the 1980s, when such political tensions declined, filmmakers moved towards 'social problem' films, reflecting the rapid social and economic changes at the rural, regional and national levels. However, it was the recognition of a new urban-based young audience and the corresponding success of a number of teenage films that laid the groundwork for the big budget, technologically savvy and internationally competent film industry which emerged during the late 1990s.

Despite the seeming disjunction in audience, filmmakers, subject matter, industrial organization and technical competence between pre- and post-1997 Thai filmmaking, film scholars and critics recognize a strong sense of nostalgia for an idealized rural past running through the films of this new urban-based industry. This nostalgia, most often embedded in images and depictions of rural Thailand, has been interpreted as a manifestation of anxieties around rapid globalization and the resulting economic crisis of the late 1990s (Harrison 2005; Harrison 2010; Ingawanij 2006). Indeed, after the pro-American era of the late 1950s and into the 1960s, a free market economy began to take root in the country and corresponding development schemes placed strong emphasis upon success and happiness through capitalist accumulation. Social changes included rapid urbanization and a significant flow of rural migration into cities, particularly Bangkok, thus changing the relationship between urban and rural spheres forevermore. Yet this free market ideology also created materialist dreams that very few Thais could actually realize, and in many ways widened the economic gap between the country and the city: as cities grew larger and wealthier with improved infrastructure, very little of this affluence filtered outwards to the provinces. In turn, rural famers became more market oriented and reliant upon purchased technology, increasing pressure on the agrarian sector and impacting upon traditional gender roles, as women emigrated to become factory workers and previous leading female agricultural labour roles were taken on by men (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005).

Thus, attached to a notion of 'Westernization,' this rapid change and its materialistic monetary manifestation greatly affected the rural lower classes in Thailand and was perceived negatively by many. In line with Kitiarsa's conception of Siamese/Thai Occidentalism (Kitiarsa 2010), when such urban-inflected notions of social progress and advancement came

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crashing down in the economic crisis of 1997, it was the urban and rural poor who were to suffer the most, with little repercussions for those responsible, and a push to instead blame unaccountable 'Western' forces outside the country, thereby removing blame from Thai elites.

It is therefore not surprising that, given this context, themes such as anxiety and critique towards these changes as well as the corresponding idealization of and nostalgia for the rural as a quintessential representation of 'true' Thainess are recognized in the big-budget internationally prominent productions of post-1997 Thai cinema. Yet, despite this emphasis, it is important to note that such a trope did not begin with this movement but has a much longer thematic history in Thai film. For instance, Ingawanij reminds us that the popular nostalgia-heavy contemporary production Monrak Transistor (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2001) was actually adapted from a novel of the same name written in the 1970s. This earlier source already expressed an existing ambivalence towards modernization and development long before the post-1997 context, anchoring Thai identity in a constructed image of the rural that is counter to the authoritative forces of modernization. Similar pre-1997 films such as Son of the Northeast (Vichit Kounavudhi, 1982), The Elephant Keeper (Chatrichalerm Yukol, 1987) and Song of Chaophraya (Chatrichalerm Yukol, 1990) also similarly anchor an authentic Thainess within such a construction.

Extending such an exploration, this chapter returns to an earlier period of Thai cinema between 1988 and 1996 to focus on the Boonchu film series, originally a part of the 1980s 'teen' industry. This famous and very popular Thai series shares similar traits to the novel of Monrak Transistor and the aforementioned films in valorizing the rural. Yet in contrast to these much more serious texts, the Boonchu series follows the traditions of lowbrow 'indigenous' Thai film from earlier eras, presenting a seemingly superficial light-hearted and frivolous story complete with much slapstick and romantic comedy. Despite this initially carefree appearance, the series also functions as an important commentary upon the social, economic and cultural issues of the time, focusing upon growing up, moving to urban areas and becoming educated, as well as exploring the central romantic relationship between the hero (Boonchu) and the heroine (Molee).

This chapter argues that the Boonchu series is an important text that incorporates many contextual signifiers of modern Thailand at the time and expresses much anxiety over the effects of modernization and the changes this was enacting upon everyday life and the environment. Indeed, this chapter indicates that the series of Boonchu films points to deep-seated social fears arising from the effects of modernization, Westernization

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and globalization, ones existing long before the similar representations in post-1997 filmic incarnations recognized by contemporary scholars. This popular light-hearted series then provides a working-through of such anxieties through an affirmation of the desirability of the rural context, one represented largely through the film's central protagonist, Boonchu.

The Post-war Thai Context

After World War II, Thailand became a base for US operations and intervention against Vietnam and communism in Asia during the Cold War (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005). As part of this process, the United States became a virtual patron of Thailand, and this new 'war economy' entwined the two governments, resulting in radical social changes that affected a significant part of the Thai population (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p. 138). Economic aid was provided to the Thai military while Bangkok became an R&R site for American soldiers. New roads, bars, nightclubs, massage parlours and brothels were established, and the modern sex industry expanded rapidly, regardless of illegality. The Tourism of Thailand Board[1] was launched as an independent organization and was involved in development planning in 1959 when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the then-prime minister, became its first president. Sarit introduced the word *phatthana* – coined from the English word 'development' and popularized this as a watchword. Work, money and happiness became intricately linked; more specifically, capitalism flourished. The first five-year development plan (which mainly focused on the economy) in the 1960s led to significant exploitation of land and, additionally, in the mid-1960s, the government secretly supported clearing forests for farming, an initiative also driven by fear of communist activity. Due to such developments, and coupled with the new commercialized economy, many rural people (mostly farmers) lost their lands and livelihood and had to move to the city to find jobs. Uneducated men and women ended up as wage labourers while many uneducated women also worked in the sex industry, catering for American soldiers on R&R.

The influx of development and economic growth promoted by Thailand's close cooperation with the United States had political and cultural

1 The Tourism of Thailand Board is a tourism organization founded in 1924 and was under the Ministry of Commerce until 1951, when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the existing prime minister, turned it into an independent organization and was its first president. Later in 1979, the organization was changed to the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

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ramifications across the country. The intensive exploitation of land and people led to clashes between guerrillas who were disappointed with the development schemes brought about by American imperialism and the military dictatorship. Intellectuals and students also joined these clashes, demonstrating against capitalism, corruption and urbanization. Such protests reached a climax in October 1973 and the later massacre of students at Thammasat University in 1976. However, after the Vietnam War, the US military departed, and so did its capital. By the 1980s the Japanese had taken a key role in the Thai economy and Thailand became a successful model and base of export manufacturing. Alongside this growth in manufacturing, tourism also grew rapidly, GDP increased, and a new affluent middle class began to emerge and grow, while the birth rate declined as marriage became delayed in favour of education and careers.

Localism and the Idealization of the Rural

Attached to this changing context, wider societal changes were apparent and unavoidable, many of which cultivated significant anxiety towards modernity. Such changes severely altered Thai social organization, and a recognized discourse of 'localism' developed as a response to the social upheaval attached to this rapid modernization and capitalist development. Localism emerged in Thailand during the 1970s as a part of a movement to 'defend' Thai culture against American imperialism and was attached to the various student demonstrations in the first half of this decade. Such a movement began to take root in all areas, especially after the 'American era' and the entry of Thailand into the global economy. However, scholars understand that this anxiety towards the influence of global culture within (and influence upon) Thailand actually started much earlier in the nineteenth century (Cook and Jackson 2003; Reynolds 1999) as a reaction to the dominance of the European powers in Southeast Asia, hence often taking on an anti-Western character. This ambivalence towards modernization was reflective of the zeitgeist, and often surfaces according to the prevailing situation. Indeed, after the American era and the threat of communism in the 1960s to 1970s, the Thai state constructed a national discourse of Thainess that can be considered localist in terms of its movement inwards to search for a Thai identity.

As part of this discourse, a number of state-led initiatives reflecting such concerns consequently began. For instance, the National Identity Board and the National Culture Commission (NCC) were created in the 1980s 'to preserve Thai culture and to encourage the adaptation of authentic Thai

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tradition' (Van Esterik 2000, p. 107). The NCC in particular initiated a spiritual development project that addressed desirable and undesirable social Thai values, which repeated Luang Wichitwathakan's discourses of hard work and diligence as part of nation-building in the period after World War II (ibid.). Specifically, this included five preferable values: 1) self-reliance, diligence and responsibility, 2) frugal spending and saving, 3) discipline and abiding by the law, 4) religious ethics, and 5) following the slogan 'Nation, religion, monarchy.' Among the twelve opposing undesirable qualities were immorality, materialism, any lack of Thai nationalism, consumerism and the abandonment of rural ways of life. Meanwhile, the National Identity Board also published books and pamphlets in Thai and English to promote national culture. One of these published in English, *Women in Thai Literature*, claimed (controversially) that Thai Buddhism guarantees gender equality (National Identity Board 1992, p. 6), thereby attempting to associate integral Thai institutions and beliefs with progressive social developments.

The Boonchu Films

The significant social anxiety associated with this wider radical economic and industrial transformation (and the corresponding surge of localism as a discourse) explains why popular Thai media products throughout the latter part of the twentieth century often continue to idealize the rural scenario. This construction can be found throughout the famous Boonchu film series; indeed, it was in the 1980s context of accelerating foreign investment and a growing discourse of localism that the first Boonchu film was shot. From its conception, this film series was intended to adhere to discourses of localism and so displays a strong idealization of the rural scenario. Comments from director and writer Bhandit Rittakol, himself from a rural province (Phothipairoj 2009), display an anxiety towards the acceleration of modernization and the rise of the urban city. Indeed, Bhandit based the screenplay for Boonchu upon his own experiences as a rural citizen who moved to Bangkok for tutoring in order to pass the university entrance exam after high school, a common goal for rural teenagers at the time. In an interview (ibid.) discussing Boonchu, Bhandit explicitly criticizes Westernization and urbanization as a source behind the decline of Thai cultural identity, claiming that such concepts are antithetical to the film's messages of generosity and friendship. The director furthers this narrative in his description of filming, claiming how, when the film was being shot in a remote area in the 1980s, the local villagers were much sincerer and more

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generous compared to locals in the 1990s. For Bhandit this was especially true when considering places closer to Bangkok, where cooperation from people would come only with remuneration.

The Boonchu series consists of eight films, dating from 1988 to 2010, with the first six Boonchu films released before the big-budget new Thai industry that began after 1997. The films were designed for mass consumption by a wide audience, containing many traditional stylistic elements found in earlier post-war Thai films, such as repetitive visceral thrills and the blending of genre traits (Ainslie 2017). The series narrates the different phases in the life of Boonchu, the male protagonist, and addresses young adult Thais who have themselves grown up with Boonchu and followed his on-screen life. The films are highly significant in the history of Thai film, with the first three instalments receiving best film awards from Thai Press Association while the first in the series, Boonchu Phu Narak (1988), is regarded as one of the hundred films that Thais must see, according to the National Film Archive.

Translated as Likable Boonchu (1988), the first film in the series (the only instalment to add an adjective to the protagonist's name) introduces the primary protagonist, Boonchu, to the audience and provides background information about him, focusing strongly upon his pursuit of education and motivations. The second film, Boonchu 2: Freshy (1989), tells the story of Boonchu at the library of Thammasat University (the second oldest university in Thailand), where he works as a librarian's assistant while studying for his second entrance exam, which he passes. Boonchu 3 and Boonchu 4 are included with Boonchu 5: Charming (1990), as one film. The film presents Boonchu's wit and generosity in helping a female junior student who is a pauper. Boonchu 6: The world is perfect, beautiful, lovely, worth living if (you are in) focus (1991) portrays Boonchu's last year at the university, depicting his quest for a life after graduation. Boonchu 7: Love only you forever, nobody can touch (you) (1993) presents Boonchu's life as a farmer and a rice trader as well as his quest to prove his love to the female protagonist he wishes to marry. Boonchu 8: For you (1995), then depicts Boonchu's life in the village, where he has to save his wife, who is pregnant. This chapter largely focuses upon Boonchu 1, Boonchu 6, and Boonchu 7, all of which contain important life stages for the hero.

The Idealized Rural in Boonchu

The Boonchu film series was extremely successful in Thailand throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, presenting an image of a

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stereotypical ordinary rural Thai man who possesses ideal attributes. The series depicts rural Thailand and rural characters – like the protagonist, country boy Boonchu – as a moral exemplar while constructions of modernity and development are depicted as negative and contrary to the positive notions of pastoral, rural Thailand and the innocent countryman Boonchu. The films emphasize Boonchu's innocence, generosity and sincerity as essential to a 'real Thai identity' which has not yet been contaminated by modernity and Westernization.

In Boonchu 1, the protagonist Boonchu is introduced as a countryman in his early 20s from Suphanburi, one of the central provinces of Thailand, about 100 kilometres north of Bangkok. The film opens with a sunrise in the countryside, signifying a new day and a new life. Daily life consists of traditional rural activities, as Boonchu, his mother, and his niece are shown offering food to monks on a dirt road, a natural backdrop of paddy fields and haystacks that suggests a peaceful, nostalgic rural idyll. Behind them are vast paddy fields, and on the left of the screen, there are two gigantic haystacks. After making offerings to the monks, the family is shown having breakfast at home. This simple way of life is depicted as pure and untouched, members of the family use a spoon to scoop their food into individual dishes and then eat rice with their hands, a traditional and staple Thai family scene.

This first film also opens with an epigram that states, 'Some things we know others may not know. Some things others know we may not know. It (not knowing) is not stupidity. Many times, it happens because of innocence and sincerity.' This immediately highlights Boonchu's rural-associated simplistic ideological and moral values, as well as sets up the approaching conflicts that Boonchu, a representative of rural life who moves to the city, will encounter. Indeed, the film quickly establishes that Boonchu is about to leave this environment for studies in Bangkok. Such a move was quite typical in late-1980s/early 1990s Thailand; due to wider societal change, higher education became a promising social ladder for young Thais, regardless of class. Such notions had permeated every domain of the nation, illustrated through this rural provincial scene in which the family discusses their son's upcoming move. Boonchu's mother tells her son to concentrate on his studies and warns him against frivolous behaviour, while Boonchu listens with honest, innocent eyes and repeats everything his mother has just said. Boonchu's obedient, docile and submissive behaviour is in accordance with the ideal characteristics of a son in Thai society who is expected to apply himself diligently to his higher education and, at the same time, to have a spirit of moral obligation (Bechstedt 2002, pp. 243-244), all of which is strongly embedded within this scene.

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The film strongly juxtaposes this 'pure' rural scenario with modern city life in Bangkok, which is contaminated by the values and practices of capitalism and globalization with its cars and skyscrapers. In an early scene when Boonchu first comes to Bangkok and needs to catch a bus back to his brother's home, the character cannot cross the road because there are too many cars, unlike his home in Suphanburi. Such experiences in Bangkok serve to highlight the differences between rural and urban Thailand, which quickly become attached to the honesty and integrity of characters. For example, once he arrives at the Bangkok bus station, Boonchu's luggage is quickly stolen while he is looking for his brother. Later, when he first goes to a tutoring school, he is cheated by a man who sells tutorial papers. All of these experiences suggest that city people are difficult to trust; the lesson that Boonchu must learn is, therefore, not, ultimately, academic, but is about the difference between the country and the city, where people speak one thing but mean another.

Within this new urban scenario, Boonchu conforms to the NCC's established values and does not abandon rural ways of life. For instance, throughout the entire series of films Boonchu speaks his own local rural dialect and not the Central Thai standard, demonstrating his strong connection to this local identity. Through this rural identity (which is opposed to urban-ness) the character comes to represent the best of Thai manhood which is then constructed as a real and desirable Thainess. Throughout the story Boonchu embodies the imagined characteristics attached to a construction of rural people, represented through physical attributes such as his broad smile, a reminder of the character's sincerity and innocence. Accordingly, Boonchu also helps those who are socially and morally inferior to him, displaying both charm and morality when assisting and sacrificing for others. For example, in Boonchu 2, Boonchu helps his friend Molee find a thief who has stolen money from the volunteer camp. The thief turns out to be his acquaintance, Boonma. Knowing that Boonma steals the money to help his poor family in the country, Boonchu feels sorry for him and often visits him in prison. Likewise, in Boonchu 5: Charming (1990), Boonchu displays both wit and generosity in helping a poorer young woman get a scholarship so that she can continue her studies.

The Collectivist and Unchanging Rural Integrity

Notably, despite the movement to this radically different environment and his interactions with the many different characters he encounters,

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Boonchu's main characteristics do not generally change from Boonchu 1 to Boonchu 8, highlighting integrity and dependability. The character remains anchored by the rural-associated values within which localism embeds idealized Thainess, prescribed by the state and maintained by religion, popular culture and even successful business sectors. Boonchu does certainly change to an extent; in the first two films he is portrayed as timid and awkward, reflecting the discordance between his life in the country and life in the city. From the third film onwards, he becomes more relaxed in this environment and is depicted as more self-assured. Yet while Boonchu does learn to adjust to this new modernized environment, it is notable that he never changes the positive qualities that are depicted as basic and quintessentially Thai and are deeply embedded within his idealized rural Thai identity, again highlighting the 'natural' and timeless nature of such values and championing these over that of the 'artificial' city which changes rapidly.

For instance, while Boonchu highlights the importance of education for a prosperous future (so necessitating his move to Bangkok), the character does not forget or reject his rural community and his overall pursuit of education is actually in aid of bettering this environment. Boonchu articulates his aspiration to study in the Faculty of Agriculture as 'so that I can acquire modern knowledge to develop my village' (Boonchu 2, 1989). In his statement, the terms 'modern' and 'develop' are important, as the phrases 'being modern' and 'concern for development' link back to Prime Minister Sarit's 1961 watchword, *phatthana*. Boonchu's use of such terms suggests that a young adult in 1980s Thailand did invest in such a movement, and that the discourses about modernization and development had a strong influence on people. Yet while Boonchu displays this desire for development (a pinnacle of modernization) at the same time the character remains concerned about his hometown and fixated upon the rural environment, which he always intends to return to. Boonchu's adoption of such notions is very different from the individualistic and materialist capitalist ideology predominant in urban Thailand at the time. In this film, such development must be in service of the wider community, and Boonchu's desire to place his village's needs above that of his own promotes collectivism over individualism.

Indeed, the series continuously highlights this form of collective rural consciousness, represented through values, beliefs and attitudes associated with this environment. In Boonchu 7, Molee, feeling stressed by the need to convince her sister to approve of her marriage, asks Boonchu, 'Do we really live for ourselves or for someone else?' Boonchu replies, 'We live for others and for ourselves, too,' thereby suggesting that Thai society should

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be collective. Another means through which such social structures are also highlighted is the strong relationship between Boonchu and his male friends, who always stand by one another. Boonchu's friends represent young adults from all over the country who chose to pursue higher education in Bangkok, and this circle of friends comes to represent a microcosm of Thailand at the time. Notably, most of these characters are also from rural societies: two are Bangkokians while the other four are from other regional provinces. Each has distinct and comical traits associated with a particular area of Thailand and, like Boonchu, their personalities are fixed and change very little from BOONCHU 1 to BOONCHU 8. For example, one character who comes from a northern province speaks very slowly when compared to others and a friend from the south speaks very fast. Despite their differences, however, the friends all also demonstrate sincerity and generosity towards each other, and when Boonchu is in trouble they are always ready to help. For example, in BOONCHU 7, the group assists Boonchu in solving the problem of water pollution to ensure that Molee can live in a good environment after her marriage to Boonchu.

The idealization and validation of the rural continues throughout the BOONCHU film series, yet such discourses change throughout the decades as Thailand becomes more urbanized and globalized. Later films in the BOONCHU series depict a much more ambivalent relationship to modernity and modernization, reflecting the diverse responses to the technological and social changes that continue to affect Thailand and the Thai people throughout the late twentieth century. In Thai cinematic history, the transistor radio has traditionally functioned as a powerful icon of modern Thailand due to its early wide adoption across the country (Ingawanij 2006, p. 80), and in BOONCHU, the equivalent potent icon would be the tractor, a significant indicator of the shift from a peasant society to a society of commercial farmers. The tractor, a modern machine, comes later on in the series in BOONCHU 6 (1991) and is implicitly presented as a tool to ease work in rice fields, thus working in harmony with pastoral rural Suphanburi. Boonchu himself demonstrates his acceptance of modernity when he uses tractors to help increase rice production in his paddy fields. This indicates that some acceptance and use of modern technology is needed in order to survive within globalization.

This depiction of technology is also problematized, however: in contrast to the tractor, the motorboat, introduced in BOONCHU 7 (1993), disrupts everyday life by creating noise and air pollution. Compared to the previous films, as a much later instalment in the series BOONCHU 7 contains more serious social issues linked to negative changes that have come

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with foreign investment and globalization, displaying significant conflict towards modernization. In this film, the central couple plan to marry and Boonchu's mother offers them a house near a river. This creates the space in which to raise the issue of the effects of modernization on the environment and particularly of water pollution, a challenge that the protagonist Boonchu (and his friends) must remedy. This difference in the depiction of motorboats and 'motor buffalos' (tractors) demonstrates the series' ability to engage with this wider changing context of modernity, assessing how such technology impacts upon everyday rural life. The tractor is a potent symbol of agricultural modernization put to productive use, whereas the motorboat is purely for leisure and, thus, unproductive.

Localism in Language and Dialect

The language used by the central protagonist is also an important signifier of rural identity and functions as a form of resistance to the urban city and its influence. As noted earlier, while Central Thai is regarded as standard Thai, Boonchu speaks a subdialect of the Central-region Thai of Suphanburi, an element that again serves to strongly connect him to an upcountry rural identity. The Thai language has long served as a means of national centralization, a process which started in the nineteenth century and became an important credential for deciding who is really 'Thai' and who is not. In the twentieth century, the central Thai language was employed to replace regional dialects in public schools and Chinese people who wanted to acquire a Thai identity had to learn to speak standard Thai, so solidifying standard Thai language as an essential element in the psychological construction of what it is to be Thai. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Myanmar or the Philippines, Thailand has had no significant social problems related to issues of linguistic policy (Diller 1991). However, Central Thai is privileged as a desirable and prestigious dialect preferred by authorities and professionals and which also signifies the speaker as educated or upper class. In the 1980s and before, parents would encourage their children to speak 'proper' Thai since it implied social mobility and occupational opportunity.

However, the BOONCHU film series does not portray Boonchu's provincial dialect as either undesirable or a serious problem, reflecting how the importance and desirability of rural Thainess even triumphs this state-approved linguistic hierarchy. Rather than denigrate the character's subdialect, this attribute makes him appear more grounded in the local and so more

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'authentically' Thai, even if these values run counter to some dominant social discourses at the time. Such privileging of local rural-associated dialects is also seen in the work of the famous folk singer Jaran Manophet, who composed songs for the series. Manophet was an important well-known folk song singer from Chiangmai, who sings and releases albums in a northern dialect, so representing another provincial (in this case Northern Thai) identity similar to that of Boonchu's. This linguistic portrayal of the male protagonist and the use of a Lanna song composer reflects the prominence of discourses of localism in the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly, in one scene the protagonists walk past a giant billboard advertising Tina Turner's concert in Thailand, but then the following scene portrays them watching *Likay*, a Thai folk theatre production, so demonstrating their rejection of globalized Western media in favour of local and rural-associated forms of entertainment.

Gender Issues

While the representation of female characters in the BOONCHU series also contributes towards valorizing the rural and perpetuating localism as a discourse, such a depiction is also conflicted and contradictory, representing the 'paradoxes' and 'contradictions' Thai women faced at this time (Van Esterik 1996, p. 4). Indeed, while Thai women now have significant roles in the labour market, they are also expected to maintain traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers at home, creating significant tensions around gender relations and social expectations. By the 1980s, the opening up of factories due to Japanese foreign investment and the increase of manufacturing saw women making up 80-90 per cent of this new labour force (Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995) and there was also a significant movement of women to urban areas seeking work and education, a move that was often represented (and critiqued) in post-war Thai cinema (Ainslie 2017).

Such changes destabilized previous gendered social constructions of women, who were previously strongly associated with the Thai home and village and expected to have very socially conservative relations with men. Indeed, conventional and hegemonic representations of Thai women were based 'on being proper (*riaproy*) and sweet (*onwann*)' in the case of upper-middle class women, 'and not a loose woman (*rak nuan sanguan tau*)' (Panitchpakdi 2007, p. 37). By the 1990s, such pressure was heightened due to the newly industrialized economy (begun in the 1980s) and there was a strong conflict between the public and private roles women were expected to

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play (Kriengkraipetch and Smith 1992). Such juxtaposition placed significant pressure upon the modern Thai woman, who was expected to conform to 'traditional' constructions of femininity while also taking advantage of 'modern' professional opportunities (Jeffrey 2002, p. 128).

Such constructions are evident in the BOONCHU series. Notably, the female characters are all educated, representing this increase in access to education for Thai citizens at the time. Yet the portrayal of the female protagonist and Boonchu's love interest, Molee, begins to highlight the conflicted identity of Thai women at this time, and the pressure to blend both traditional and modern attributes. Molee's traits follow the older hegemonic discourse of a desirable Thai wife prescribed by King Rama VI (1910-1925), stating that a new Thai woman should be 'literate, smart, active, shrewd, as knowledgeable as men, but never leave housework behind, and sociable, knowing Western language and culture' (Songsamphan 2004, p. 86).

The representation of Molee successfully adheres to such a complex (and contradictory) construction while also incorporating more modern values. Molee represents the corollary of Boonchu. Although she is urban and wealthier, she follows desirable Thai norms and manners for women and is not corrupted by the city. Molee herself also possesses a sense of autonomy, being decisive in her relationships and talking openly to Boonchu about their relationship, telling him that both of them need time to think it over. Above all, Molee insists upon making her own choice about whether to live with Boonchu or her sister after she gets married. Yet Molee also incorporates traditional qualities associated with the rural home and village: she is never portrayed holding Boonchu's hands or kissing and, as a traditional woman, reserves access to her body, asserting that she wants a conventional marriage. In depicting the main female character as a successful negotiation of such conflicting and contradictory roles, the film seems to problematically suggest that this construction is both easy and desirable, so perhaps negating the unfair and difficult situation Thai women were forced within.

Alongside such a construction, the film's portrayal of strong women is also problematic, associating many of these traits with negative characteristics. Molee's sister, Manee, owns a production house and is a tough, independent and decisive woman, yet as a woman with financial autonomy, Manee is also single, perhaps suggesting that such autonomy is incompatible with the more traditional identity of a being a wife and having a family. The portrayal of the character Lalita in BOONCHU 6 is also indicative; Lalita is the only female villain in the film series and is portrayed as a working woman who is selfish, calculating, and deviates from conventional norms of femininity. Lalita works in Manee's production house and, in contrast to Molee's demur

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clothing and lack of cosmetics, wears full red lipstick and permed, long hair. She appears in a suit with a miniskirt and high heels, showing her long, lean legs, presenting a striking contrast to Molee's appearance. The character's intentions and morality are also correspondingly different; Lalita flirts with all the men around her, including Boonchu, his friends and his cousin, giving them love letters containing the same message on Valentine's Day. Additionally, she deceives Boonchu's male cousin and uses him in order to have Boonchu sign an unfair contract for her advertising project. Lalita's career ambitions, therefore, become both immoral and profligate; she represents a modern woman who ignores conservative female constructions of a 'proper woman' stereotype and so becomes a negative and immoral character.

Buddhism as a Core Aspect of Thai Identity

The depiction of Buddhism is heavily entwined within the BOONCHU series and throughout the films this faith is constructed as part of the 'core' of Thainess, functioning as an important part of the urban/rural conflict upon which the series' premise rests. Buddhism has been a key factor in the construction of Thai society throughout the twentieth century (Andaya 2002), playing an important role in formulating character traits, psychological orientations, and social values in Thai society (Van Esterik 2000; Jackson 1991). Modern Thai identity is rooted in Buddhism (Jackson 1991, p. 156), which is also heavily embedded in context and locality (Van Esterik 1996, p. 65) and such traits support the idealization of the rural, especially during the period of Westernization and urbanization in Thailand.

Boonchu's identity as a simple and pure young man from the rural provinces is also inextricably linked to Buddhism. Through such a depiction the series offers a very positive celebration of Buddhist values, represented through Boonchu himself. Buddhism is presented as a core aspect of Thai identity and one that produces and shapes Boonchu's more desirable attributes, particularly the character's tolerance, non-violent outlook and even his tendency to smile. Indeed, narrative-wise, Boonchu's religious nature immediately differentiates him from those around him: in the city environment he is slightly older than his friends, who are below 20, because Boonchu spent years in the monkhood. Boonchu knows Pali, the language of the Buddhist texts, and is depicted discussing moral issues with a local abbot using Pali, translating the meanings into Thai. Boonchu's history and background are also deeply entwined within the Buddhist order: at

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the start of the narrative, Boonchu's father has already died and a local monk has assumed the patriarchal role of the father. Likewise, Boonchu's family enjoys a close relationship with the abbot of a nearby temple, who is involved in the different stages of Boonchu's life throughout the films. Boonchu and his mother come to talk to the abbot if they are having a problem or making a transition in life and the abbot helps solve Boonchu's problems. For example, in BOONCHU 2 (1989) the abbot helps by sending Boonchu to his friend who is a librarian at Thammasat University when Boonchu wants to take the entrance exam again.

Buddhism also informs the main conflicts in the films, becoming representative of the 'traditional culture' that is opposed to the 'Westernized modernity' represented by the urban city. Such conflicts, therefore, generally take the form of a clash between urban and rural values, issues that also become gendered; indeed, the unequal status between men and women is due in part to the patriarchal nature of Theravada Buddhism, in which the position of a woman is regarded as worldly while men are other-worldly (Kirsch 1985). For instance, in BOONCHU 1, before Boonchu leaves the village for Bangkok, a monk tells him to concentrate on his studies. He uses a metaphor to teach Boonchu by saying that wisdom is 'the gem of a sage' and commands the protagonist to bring knowledge from the urban city back to the rural village. In a reflection of the patriarchal nature of Thai Buddhism and the construction of women as a hindrance to the supramundane path, the Abbot then also warns that women will interfere and prevent Boonchu from getting an education. Specifically, the abbot is associated with purity, religion and the rural, while Boonchu's love interest Molee is associated with love, desire and the city.

Notably, however, such instructions are not blindly obeyed, and instead create conflict, which is then resolved comfortably through compromise, an indication as to how the film works to negotiate and resolve new conflicting social forces that affect the Thai citizen. For instance, Boonchu is attracted to the female protagonist Molee, and wants to find a job and stay in Bangkok to be close to her. The abbot's instructions to Boonchu (that he should bring knowledge from the city back to the village) impinges upon Boonchu's conscience and urges him to go home. Yet, despite this, Boonchu later asks the abbot for permission to look for a job in Bangkok for a few years, demonstrating the compromise. The situation is ultimately resolved, however, by restoring the moral high ground of Buddhism and the abbot's superior knowledge: seeing that Bangkok is too crowded and the job market very competitive, Boonchu decides to go home, to the country, to the abbot, and to a 'pure' life in the countryside.

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Alongside the emphasis upon Buddhism, BOONCHU 7 and BOONCHU 8 also incorporate supernatural elements into their plots, beliefs which reinforce discourses of localism. Such an insertion reflects the hybridized nature of Thai Buddhism, which mixes elements of Theravada Buddhism alongside folk Brahmanism and animism, all of which is often represented through a belief in supernatural beings (Kitiarsa 2005a). Known as 'popular Buddhism,' as opposed to the mainstream Theravada Buddhism imposed by the government, this belief in supernatural elements such as ghosts and magic is also heavily associated with the rural context. Research suggests that Thai villagers adhere to popular Buddhism as a means of empowerment, especially during the rapidly changing mid-1980s/1990s economic boom (Kitiarsa 2005b), when rural people became increasingly vulnerable and powerless. In BOONCHU 8, Boonchu and his friends have to redeem their vows to the spirit who is believed to have helped Molee recover from life-threatening surgery. Those who reject such local beliefs are also punished; in BOONCHU 7, a foreign character, Steve, participates in a traditional ceremony to contact the dead through a medium. Steve does not believe in mediums, saying it is nonsense, but later is possessed by a fierce spirit that causes a hilarious scene where all of the characters flee in a manner reminiscent of lowbrow traditional Thai ghost films. Thus, the films reemphasize the existence of animism and show the unpleasant consequences for those who reject the power of the supernatural that is a part of these local beliefs, while also hinting at contradictions between the state-sponsored Buddhism and popular Buddhism.

Conclusion

Close analysis of the BOONCHU film series reveals that these texts display significant anxiety towards modernization in Thailand at this time. The films offer an attempt to 'make safe' and work through wider social issues in ways that can be both socially challenging and also reactionary. In keeping with the predominance of localism as a social discourse during this period, this chapter has illustrated how the series places strong emphasis upon associating very positive characteristics with a rural identity and constructs this as a desirable attribute for Thais during the social upheaval caused by increased industrialization and rural migration. These national discourses have taken very active, pervasive roles in formulating Thai identity during this period, while global forces have been largely peripheral.

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In particular, the Boonchu films depict the ongoing tensions between urban and rural Thailand during a moment of transition before the turn of the century, tensions that impact upon the characters of Boonchu and his friends. Similar to many rural Thais at this time, the characters struggle to adapt to modern society, yet Boonchu continues to do so due to a patriotic ambition to develop his homeland. This is represented through the integrity of the rural scenario (largely represented through Boonchu himself), the use of local dialects in the film, the construction of women and the depiction of Buddhism. All of these depictions both champion rural Thailand as a defender of Thai values, while also offering a negotiation of various influences of modernity, rather than an outright rejection.

This light-hearted film series therefore signifies the tension Thai people felt towards the cultural and economic transformation of their society throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. Within this transformation the character of Boonchu becomes a national ideal, stoically retaining the constructed Thai rural values of kindness, piety, and sincerity throughout this changing context.

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After the end of World War II when many Southeast Asian nations gained national independence, and up until the Asian Financial Crisis, film industries here had distinctive and colourful histories shaped by unique national and domestic conditions. *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)* addresses the similar themes, histories, trends, technologies and sociopolitical events that have moulded the art and industry of film in this region, identifying the unique characteristics that continue to shape cinema, spectatorship and Southeast Asian filmmaking in the present and the future. Bringing together scholars across the region, chapters explore the conditions that have given rise to today's burgeoning Southeast Asian cinemas as well as the gaps that manifest as temporal belatedness and historical disjunctures in the more established regional industries.

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